

Cooking and Eating as Linguistic Experiences:
Metamorphoses in the Japanese Familial Culinary
Universe Reflected in the Movie パパのお弁当は世界
— *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* — *Dad's Lunch Box*¹

BEATRICE-MARIA ALEXANDRESCU

University of Bucharest, Romania

“For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.” (Barthes 24)

Abstract

The aim of this study is to describe the role of *bentōs* (Japanese lunch boxes) in contemporary Japanese society and its importance in different types of interpersonal relationships (the father-daughter relationship, friendship and love relationships). We will illustrate the value of this cultural element by analyzing the movie パパのお弁当は世界 — *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* — *Dad's Lunch Box* (2017) directed by Fukatsu Masakazu (who drew inspiration from a popular post on Tweeter in which a girl's high school graduation day is marked by the fact that she conveys her thanks to her father for having prepared her daily *bentōs* in the last three years (Shoji)), a movie that reflects various aspects of modern Japan: the changing roles of family members and the changing relationships between them. Moreover, we will focus on how *bentō* evolves into a means of communication in this movie, and how it contributes to reconfiguring the facets of Japanese masculinities in a society that

is no more characterized by its traditional form. We will also depict the characteristics of *bentōs* and will take into consideration their historical background in order to situate them in the context of the evolution of food-preparing practices.

Keywords: Japan; contemporary Japanese culture; *bentō*; food culture; salaryman; father-daughter-relationship; food aesthetics; *kaizen*; Japanese cinematography; popular culture.

Introduction

There is probably no admirer of the animations produced by the Japanese film studio Ghibli who did not remark the food aesthetics present in vibrant images: eye-catching *rāmen* (a Japanese soup containing noodles) in 崖の上のポニョ *Gake no Ue no Ponyo* (*Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, 2008), (eye-)nourishing *bentōs* (Japanese lunch boxes) in となりのトトロ *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988) and *onigiri* (rice balls) in 千と千尋の神隠し *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (known as *Spirited Away*, 2001) build a visually captivating world in which food is not only an element that belongs to the background, but also a component that defines one's identity and relationship with others. Japanese food culture is indeed a rich one as regards the flavours, the tastes, the ingredients, the aesthetics, the rituals and the manners that compose the daily connection with the culinary universe and incorporate an emotional dimension. Moreover, in a continuously changing society, the roles of *the actors* that participate in the process of cooking are going through a metamorphosis. Women are no longer the only figures that prepare food for their children and husbands, "... the growing niche of *papaben*, or *bento* lunches prepared by fathers dipping their toes into the culinary world" ("People ...") being a phenomenon that demonstrates the diversified family structures that characterize modernity. Masculinities are gradually becoming a part of the

familial culinary universe, as shown in the movie パパのお弁当は世界一 *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi — Dad's Lunch Box* (literal translation: *Dad's Lunch Box is the Best in the World*) (2017), which depicts the importance of *bentōs* in contemporary Japanese society, and the active role it has in (re)building the father-daughter-relationship. Fukatsu Masakazu's movie is based on a Tweeter post in which a high school girl marks her graduation day by thanking her father for having prepared her *bentōs* in the last three years (Shoji). The popular Tweet also included a photo with the last *bentō* made by him (Shoji).

The movie depicts the evolving relationship between Midori, a high school girl, and Toshikazu, her recently divorced father, a salaryman who has to prepare daily *bentōs* for his daughter, thus replacing her mother, who previously made them for Midori. Although the first ones are far from a pleasing aesthetic and gustatory experience, he tries to improve his technique in order to make his daughter happy. She even asks him to prepare *bentōs* for a male schoolmate whom she sees as a potential boyfriend. Midori's father receives advice from a female colleague, who explains to him the *kawaii*² concept, a necessary one when talking about a *bentō* made for a young girl. Consequently, his next *bentōs* are better, and his relationship with Midori improves accordingly.

It is true that “By doing the work of ‘wife’ and ‘mother,’ women quite literally *produce* family life from day to day, through their joint activities with others” (DeVault 13), but what happens when a recently divorced salaryman has to prepare *bentōs* for his daughter? Is he not actually “producing family life” in a dislocated family? By replacing her mother, is he not trying to reconstruct this “family life” at least partially and “to produce” it not only in the culinary field, but also in the emotional one? *Papaben* (*bentōs* prepared by fathers) are an example of an element produced by contemporaneity, in which men also begin to gain their “power” from the power of food”: “The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connections to and influence over others. Hence, although there are other components

of female identity and other sources of their authority, the power of women has often derived from the power of food” (Counihan 46).

Such an “authority” is transferred to Midori’s father, who builds a relationship with his daughter by means of *bentōs*. The father enriches his male “identity” by “feeding” his daughter. What is even more interesting is Kaori Shoji’s comparison between the paternal figure in *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* and the paternal figure in the emblematic movie 東京物語 *Tōkyō Monogatari Tokyo Story* (1953) directed by Ozu Yasujirō, a movie which – as Shoji underlines – reflects the contrast between past and present-day fathers’ attitudes towards their role in the household: although the father in Ozu’s movie is a “kind and gentle patriarch,” “... did he once help the women in his family or even get his own tea?” (Shoji). What Shoji emphasizes is the fact that the paternal figure in Ozu’s movie represents the image of a “traditional” father – a member of a specific family who, in most cases, does not participate in household chores, although he is a “kind and gentle patriarch,” while the paternal figure in *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* illustrates a completely different image, a “modern” one, that of a man who has an essential role in the kitchen. The *bentō*-preparing father’s “power” in the movie *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* derives not only from the financial field but also from the culinary one. He is not only “the head of the family” but also “the head of the kitchen.” By replacing Midori’s mother, Toshikazu does not only become active in the space of the kitchen, but also changes his role in the emotional economy of the dislocated family.

The aim of this study is to illustrate a slice of the richness specific to Japanese food culture, and the roles received by single men in the present-day kitchen by analyzing the above-mentioned movie. The article seeks to analyze the cultural value of *bentōs* in the context of rather fragile interpersonal relationships: the father-daughter relationship and teenage relationships (for instance, friendship and love relationships). First, we will present the meaning of *bentōs* for Japanese people, starting with the historical background and continuing with the way they are integrated in Japanese modernity. Then, we will discuss how these lunch boxes

shape different roles in the various relationships that appear in the movie *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi*.

A Brief History of *Bentōs* and Their Multiple Facets

Bentōs, in the form commonly used nowadays, are a part of a rich historical background. They have appeared in various ways throughout history and have been reevaluated and reconfigured in order to meet the needs of a specific society. *Bentōs* are eaten at school, at work, and at *hanami* (flower-viewing events). Sometimes they intermingle with the “*kawaii*” concept, thus resulting, for instance, boxes with the image of the well-known character Hello Kitty. Some ingredients that can be included in such a lunch box are “grilled fish, fried meat, fish cake, and vegetables of various kinds” (“About Japanese Box Lunches”), as well as “rice, pickles and several small side dishes” (Cwierka 230). The boxes can be made from a variety of materials: traditional ones such as “fine sheets of wood,” or “bamboo and willow strips,” and modern ones such as aluminum and plastic (“Bento Gallery”). Its emotional dimension in the familial sphere is clear, *bentō* being seen as a “... medium of visual and affective communication between a mother and her child” (Seddon 301). Furthermore, “Homemade bento are also **viewed as a vehicle of communication** between the creator and the consumer; in many cases the expression of love between a parent and his or her child” (“JICC Gourmet Newsletter”). This is in consonance with what Samantha Punch, Ian McIntosh, and Ruth Emond argue, that “food works not only on a material level as sustenance but also on a symbolic level as something that can come to stand for thoughts, feelings, and relationships” (227). These lunch boxes are cultural elements which reflect various aspects of the Japanese society, since, as Kazumi Kumagai explains, “The bento carries with it a long heritage of hospitality and playfulness” (5). What is more, the visual dimension is also important when preparing them: they are an “**art form**” (“JICC Gourmet Newsletter”) and “It is an act of bricolage that requires one to be creative as a practitioner of life” (Kumagai 9), while “Part of the

fun of making a box lunch is creating a visually appealing arrangement that will whet the appetite” (“About Japanese Box Lunches”). Moreover, it is desirable that *bentōs* should include “... an attractively colored assortment of foods” (“Preparing”). As Kenji Ekuan points out,

To the Japanese, beauty has never existed outside a seasonal context. The scenery of the lunchbox is scarcely other than an expression of such a poetic. Were you to order lunchboxes regularly throughout the year and keep a careful record of their ‘scenery,’ you would discover they formulated a vivid scroll illuminating the seasons and other natural phenomena of Japan. (28)

Another characteristic of Japanese food culture is the visual dimension – not only one’s taste buds, but one’s eyes should be delighted as well, in this case, with an image of the seasons. Additionally, what Ekuan describes in this excerpt is the strong relationship between seasons and the elements that compose *bentōs*. The ingredients and the way they were arranged in the lunch box in order to suggest various “natural phenomena” exemplify the essential role nature has in Japanese aesthetics.

Besides this, *bentōs* have a long history which illustrates their cultural significance and their key role in preserving the Japanese tradition while also linking them to modernity. Although “the boxed lunch” entered Japan a very long time ago – “... the boxed lunch originated in Song-dynasty (960-1279) China and arrived in Kyoto in the late 1300s” (“Bento Lunch Boxes” 34) –, this form of lunch has developed in many ways, an aspect which is shown by some words that exist in the Japanese language and that refer to different types of *bentōs* (what is more, some of them characterize contemporaneity, as we will further show). One such type is *makunouchi bentō*, a *bentō* the Edo era (1603-1868) is known for: “... **makunouchi bento** (幕の内 まくのうち), or ‘between-scenes bento,’” which was “the most popular type of

bento to consume between acts of a play” (“JICC Gourmet Newsletter”), not to mention “An Edo era expression, *koshi-ben*, was one of the earliest labels for the emerging middle class. The term literally refers to the lunch-box (*bentō*) that Edo samurai would attach to their clothes at the waist (*koshi*). In the late nineteenth century, it referred to an office worker in Western clothes making his way to work with his lunch-box in hand” (Gordon 155). Furthermore, the gradual technological development in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912) also meant the emergence of new words – *bentōs* were adapted to the necessities of the life specific to a portion of time, for instance, “... **ekiben** (駅弁 えきべん), or ‘station bento,’ which could be taken on the trains for a quick meal while traveling across the country” (“JICC Gourmet Newsletter”). Moreover, an important characteristic of *ekiben* is that it “usually contain[s] a local speciality” (Cwiertka 228), a fact that displays their diversity. In this context, it is essential to emphasize that *bentōs* “help lend order to the lives of Japanese people and help identify who they are” (Noguchi 317). Coming closer to the present day, we encounter another type of *bentō*, namely *Hinomaru bentō*, “Rising Sun Lunch Box,” (Cwiertka 117), a lunch box which has a facet that transcends the family background, possessing a symbolic nature and being associated with patriotism, with the unity of the nation, with binding one’s self to the matrix of the nation. As Katarzyna Cwiertka explains, “The origin of the *Hinomaru bentō* is attributed to an initiative of 1937 in a girls’ school in the Hiroshima prefecture, where this patriotic lunch box was consumed by pupils each Monday as a token of solidarity with the troops fighting in China” (117-118). These *bentōs* could be regarded as representing a form of “community,” of being together and sharing the same emotions, of having a similar experience; however, as Cwiertka states, the above-mentioned “symbolism” is “misleading” (117), and, furthermore, “This meal of questionable nourishing quality is totally unrepresentative of the general approach to nutrition in wartime Japan” (117). Even closer to the present day is another type of *bentōs* – キャラ弁 *kyara-ben* –, “bento with ingredients shaped or arranged in a way to create an image of a popular

character or scene” (“JICC Gourmet Newsletter”), for instance, *bentōs* including ingredients that are arranged in the box in order to illustrate Totoro, the character in the animated film *Tonari no Totoro*. The existence of this kind of *bentō* shows the evolution of the lunch boxes, and, besides this, demonstrates the fact that popular culture – in our case, animated fantasy films, which are a part of what is called “contemporaneity” – influences the familial sphere and the interaction between parents and children. Their relationship gains new facets, for example, the need to create such *bentōs* in order to attract the child and determine him/her to eat the food contained in the box. Another aspect that indicates the evolution of *bentōs* are the restaurants called 弁当屋 *bentōya*:

While the station box meals (*ekiben*) ... are at the lower end of the price scale of box or tray meals, there are also restaurants (*bentōya*) that specialize in preparing box meals (*bentō*) either for consumption on the premises or for taking out. In fact, very luxurious restaurants will pack a lunch in a traditional three- or four-tier set of lacquered boxes, which must be returned. Truly wealthy traditional-minded households might have their own elaborate set of nested boxes, which they send to a favorite restaurant for filling before embarking on a flower-viewing picnic. (Ashkenazi and Jacob 141-142)

This fact again demonstrates the adaptation of these lunch boxes to the characteristics of the modern society, whose own way of consuming food – at home or in a restaurant – is subject to change. In the end, we mention another word which characterizes modernity, namely *papaben* – *bentōs* prepared by fathers –, which was presented at the beginning of this article, a word which encompasses the world of those fathers who reinforce their masculinity by having “power” (Counihan 46) in the kitchen.

Thus, we observe the bond between food – in our situation, *bentōs* – and identity, be it individual (for instance, in the case of *ekiben*) or national (in the case of *Hinomaru bentō*). The evolution of this kind of food depicts different approaches to the act of eating and preparing food and generally the way the human being interacts with

food, which can be an element used in order to convey various things, such as love and unity.

Food and Its Cultural and Social Dimensions

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, “the opposition between raw and cooked is homologous to that between nature and culture” (45). As Theodore Bestor and Victoria Bestor state, “... *shoku bunka* (food culture) is a key concept for understanding the day-to-day foodways of Japanese society” (13). Food is indeed part of every culture that exists in the world. By understanding what *the Other* eats, one has the chance to discover what characterizes *Otherness*. This is also true for the relationship between a father and his daughter: by understanding Midori’s gustatory and visual preferences, Toshikazu gradually discovers his daughter’s identity. The connection between man, culture and food is a complex one, which includes different kinds of feelings and a continuity between the consumed product and the human identity, and, as Nir Avieli and Bestor and Bestor state, also a form of “community”:

In a world where communities are imagined (Anderson 1991), food is exceptional. ...

Food and foodways make a unique contribution to this process of imagination, as they bridge the gap between the imagined and the concrete. The materiality of food, the tastes, aromas and textures of ingredients and dishes allow diners/consumers to experience the materiality of the community. ... The tens or hundreds of millions who consume ‘national dishes’ ... taste, smell and feel the food which they imagine their compatriots to be eating at the very same time, thus adding a material dimension to the process of imagination, attributing it with a sense of reality and removing it from the realm of fantasy. (Avieli 144-145)

Cuisine is a product of cultural imagination and is thought to include the range of practices and preferences that are shared broadly across the members of a society as they prepare and partake of food. (Bestor and Bestor 13)

Not only languages, but also dishes and the rituals that accompany them unite the people who belong to the same nation, being a form of communication among them. They create a specific structure in society. As the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss wrote at the end of his essay “The Culinary Triangle,” “Thus we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure—or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions” (47). Accordingly, the acts of preparing food and eating are linguistic experiences that contribute to shaping interpersonal relationships.

The aspects mentioned in the following excerpt will be investigated further in our study. In other words, what kind of “meanings and symbols” is Midori (the female protagonist in the movie *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi*) “consuming”? Are they part of an experience that suggests the reorganization of the familial structure? As Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil remark, “when we eat, we are not merely consuming nutrients, we are also consuming gustatory (i.e., taste-related) experiences and, in a very real sense, we are also ‘consuming’ *meanings* and *symbols*. Every aliment in any given human diet carries a symbolic charge along with its bundle of nutrients” (51-52).

Bentōs are a part of the everyday life of many Japanese children and teenagers, conveying the image of the dynamics of the contemporary society. In the movie *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi*, they are a symbol of the continuously developing father-daughter relationship. While the beginning of the movie presents a Japanese father – a novice in the world of *bentōs* – the end shows the change he has undergone in order to become a completely different person: he is now able to bring the smile to his daughter’s face with his remarkable lunch boxes. Their emotional bond and his relationship to cooking are simultaneously improving, revealing the power of *bentōs*: that of enriching one’s interpersonal relationships and one’s self. As Panos Kotzathanasis wrote in his movie review, “Through the concept of bento making, in metaphoric fashion, Fukatsu also highlights the difficulties fathers have to understand their

daughters, although he also stresses the fact that patience and effort (from both sides) can lead to great results.” These lunch boxes become a means of understanding Midori’s life stages, the problems she encounters as a teenager and especially her inner self. In the past, fathers did not have the occasion to cook for their daughters, the Japanese mothers being the ones traditionally assigned the task of making *bentōs*. *Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi* displays a tension that characterizes the contemporary society: between the past, represented by the image of the maternal figure in the space of the kitchen, and the present, which is characterized by the changing roles of fathers.

Papa no Obentō wa Sekai Ichi — Dad’s Lunch Box
(2017) – Feeding a Child, Nurturing a New Relationship

The plot focuses on a significant change in the dynamics of Midori’s family: her daily *bentōs* will not be prepared by her mother anymore, but by her recently divorced father, who is a salaryman. The movie can be divided into two parts, the first one portraying him as a clumsy father in the challenging world of the kitchen, while the second one illustrates a Japanese father whose efforts to improve the *bentō*-preparing technique are appreciated by his daughter. As already stated, the improvement of *bentō*-cooking skills can be associated with the development of the father-daughter relationship. This parallelism reflects Jean-Pierre Poulain’s words: **“Eating is a social act, even more so: a social event, central to family and public life.** Meals are the foundation of socialization, in the twofold meaning of the word: the place to learn the rules of living together and the place for social interaction, for sharing and for friendly exchange.”

In the first part of the movie, Midori opens lunch boxes which have almost nothing to do with the idea of preparing *bentōs* for a daughter: the rotten fish Midori finds in a lunch box is an example which shows the initial problems encountered by the father in preparing the lunch boxes. In our case, not only eating, but also cooking and the process that precedes cooking (shopping,

discussions with his colleagues, learning) contribute to socialization; they help the father create the foundation of a relationship.

According to Kotzathanasis, “Initially, he thinks it is an easy work, but soon realizes that for schoolgirls, in particular, bento, and especially its appearance, is an indication of social status that can ruin one’s reputation.” The father’s first *bentōs* and the *furoshiki* (cloths that are used to wrap different objects, such as wine bottles and books) are not particularly aesthetically appealing, which, as Kotzathanasis explains, represents a major social problem in Midori’s case. Although the cloth used by Toshikazu is green, which is also Midori’s given name (*Midori* means “green” in Japanese), this symbolism does not impress his daughter. Nevertheless, he struggles in order to make attractive *bentōs*, an example for this being the scenes which depict Toshikazu searching for information on how to deal with different cooking activities and practicing, scenes which present *bentōs* as being a path to self-development as well. In addition, for Midori, discovering what is packed in the box means also discovering new facets of the father-daughter relationship, while cooking for her is for Toshikazu equivalent to identifying hidden potentialities of this emotional tie (they were hidden in the past, when his role in the family was probably only that of earning money). Besides being a way of conveying a parent’s love towards his/her child (a symbol of communication and love), *bentōs* constitute in this movie a direct form of communication, an aspect which is illustrated by the fact that Midori and her father start communicating through notes left in the dull lunch box, which help him understand what is absent in the food.

Additionally, *bentōs* are a means of strengthening the relationship between Midori and her friends. When they see for the first time the box containing food prepared by Toshikazu, they are kind and encourage her to eat it, telling Midori that it might taste good. When her friends understand from her that it is too salty, they want to offer Toshikazu’s daughter a part of their *bentōs*, a fact which displays their empathy and thoughtfulness. Another scene

depicts their reaction after seeing one of the other *bentōs* created by Toshikazu: Midori's friends mention arguments for his new failure – the father's lack of time –, thus proving their warmheartedness and gentleness. By directly showing their understanding, they further develop their emotional bond with Midori. Thus, for Midori, *bentōs* function as a means of spending quality time in the company of her friends.

Furthermore, in the context of Toshikazu's discussions with a male coworker, one observes new valences of *bentōs*: while talking about food, one talks about everyday difficulties. This is the moment when Toshikazu opens up to another salaryman in order to solve these problems. This coworker is actually impressed by the fact that Toshikazu prepares *bentōs* for his daughter and even gives him some advice with regard to what to include in the box – *sashimi* (raw fish). Nonetheless, what really contributes to the development of Toshikazu's relationship with his daughter are the dialogues between him and a female coworker, which are undoubtedly revealing: the presence of a woman in this culinary landscape helps Toshikazu make better *bentōs*. This female coworker has an important role in the relationship between Toshikazu and Midori: she explains to him the “*kawaii*” concept,² and the boxes which incorporate it and teaches him one of the essential ingredients of a *bentō*: colour(s). *Bentōs* – as she tells him – have to include numerous colours. Moreover, she informs him of the existence of recipe books in the bookstores.

One morning Midori finds a really *kawaii* lunch box wrapped in a nice, *kawaii furoshiki*. The food is also delicious. Holding the wrapped box and smiling – a clear sign of the change in the father-daughter relationship – is like holding a token of love. Her thanks bring him joy. Toshikazu worked hard in order to please Midori. New recipes and *bentōs* full of colours and paternal enthusiasm fill the former emotional gap between the two characters. *Bentōs* are now a way of nourishing this bond. Toshikazu has a lot to learn, but soon Midori will also understand that he truly loves her. When she starts dating a boy, she asks her father to prepare two *bentōs* (one for her and one for him), without

telling him that she is dating someone, but one can observe the following contrast between the two relationships, between Midori and Toshikazu and between Midori and her male schoolmate: while the first one is characterized by a continuous development, the second one is marked by the boy's ignorance towards the girls' feelings. The second "relationship" is actually based on the fact that Midori brings this boy *bentōs* prepared by Toshikazu, because the boy's mother – as he tells Midori in the first half of the movie – has no time for preparing lunch for him. Although she hopes to develop a love relationship with this schoolmate by giving him *bentōs* prepared by her father, the boy shows no signs of being interested in her. Nevertheless, *bentō* represents in this movie a form of being present in the (emotional) life of the other, of showing one's care: on the one side, by including better ingredients in the box in order to make his daughter happy, Toshikazu shows that he cares for her and that he is not absent from her life; on the other side, by bringing this boy her father's *bentōs*, Midori reveals her empathy towards her male schoolmate. What is more, the audience can understand the high school girl's feelings towards the boy. In this movie, the lunch boxes are a prolongation of one's inner self and a way of establishing new relationships or refreshing older ones. The quintessential element when making a *bentō* worthy of admiration is actually one's inner self: the human component is far more important than any other *kawaii* decorations, such as *bentō* props. The man and his constant struggle are the primary forces that embellish this cultural element, the other ingredients being secondary to it. Toshikazu's efforts remind one of the Japanese concept called *kaizen*: "The KAIZEN philosophy assumes that our way of life – be it our working life, our social life, or our home life, – deserves to be constantly improved" (Imai 3).

It may be inferred that Toshikazu applies this Japanese concept to his private life. The result of his efforts are the antithetical scenes which display completely different messages, totally different encounters: although the first notes left by Midori in the lunch box were similar to some reminders of her father's unskillfulness, the ones that are illustrated at the end of the movie

suggest that his initiation in the world of *bentōs* has reached its end. The next stage in Midori's life (she graduated from high school) is rather a rupture for the father: he thanks her for having eaten his *bentōs*, and she thanks him for having prepared them. These *bentōs* are symbols of the cultivation of harmonious relationships, being synonymous with refining one's self and one's way of approaching others.

Conclusion

According to the discussed points, it appears that *bentōs* are a form of communication and of embroidering one's relationships with one's profound emotions. They are a metaphor for the idea of a "portable presence." Toshikazu's paternal love for Midori manifests itself in the rich culinary universe, the lunch boxes being symbols of one's subtle presence. At the same time, the paternal figure who prepares them for his daughter shows a contrast between tradition and modernity: the father tries to recover the lost ingredients of the traditional family by learning about the secret world of the kitchen, his being there representing a piece of contemporaneity.

Notes:

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented at the *Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Conference* organized by the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and Communication Studies, Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University of Constanța (16-17 Apr., 2021).

² For more on this concept, see Kinsella (1995), who defines it in the following terms: "*Kawaii* or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances" (220).

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