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To Love Sugar One Does Not Have to Eat It

Abstract: Sugar holds a special place in both public policy and scientific debate, each of which frequently attributes to it a unique, intrinsic power. A rather deterministic view of sugar is asserted in a range of scholarly fields, including findings of parallels between the brain's response to sugar and opiates, widespread suggestions of a hardwired human attraction to sweetness, and public health claims that increased access to affordable sugar inevitably leads to epidemic increases in rates of obesity around the globe. Japan poses an important counterpoint to such approaches because—despite high wealth levels and affordable access to sugary foods—it is a striking outlier to global obesity trends. Yet, surprisingly, while Japan's per capita consumption of sugar is much lower than other wealthy nations, the intensity of interest and cultural elaboration around sweet foods is arguably far greater than in the United States and Europe. Through an examination of attitudes, experiences, and patterns of use concerning sweet foods in Japan, this paper considers the conundrum of how and why Japanese tend to love sweet foods more but consume them less, furthering our understanding of the interplay of materiality and meaning in food and eating, while also addressing key questions regarding sugar and sweetness that have implications for issues of public health and nutrition.

Keywords: Japan, sugar, confectionary, obesity

AYUMI, A MIDDLE-AGED JAPANESE WOMAN in Kyoto, explained to me how much she loves sweets: sweets of all kinds, chocolate, traditional Japanese sweets (*wagashi*), but particularly cakes. She really enjoyed going to cake shops. Usually she would buy something small, but other times she would simply be happy admiring the confections. "Truly?" I asked her. "You can look at all those sweets and not want to eat them?"

"Yes," she explained. "Sometimes you can be satisfied just by looking."[1]

Ayumi's surprising assertion is emblematic of Japanese people's seemingly contradictory relationship to sugar and sweets. Her view, and the place of sweets in Japanese culinary culture more generally, is certainly at odds with the everyday experience of many Westerners (particularly those who are sweets lovers) who struggle not to overindulge in sweets, much less not to indulge in them at all. Her view is, moreover, at odds with a scientific literature, ranging from public health to neuroscience, that attributes a druglike power to sugar that cannot be resisted (e.g., Tanda and Di Chiara 1998). If sugar is available, this argument holds, people will eat it. And if people eat it, they will eat too much of it. By extension, if sugar is present in a society and consumers can readily afford it, public health studies suggest that obesity is an inevitable outcome (Popkin 2009). Popular literature accounts advise consumers that they cannot resist chocolate because they are chocoholics, barely better able to resist that Godiva truffle (or a small box of Godiva truffles . . .) than junkies can resist their heroin fix.[2] Ayumi's words, although striking, are not idiosyncratic. It is not that the Japanese do not have sweets, nor that they somehow manage to dislike them. Rather, it is the case that contrary to many popular assumptions about sugar, the Japanese demonstrate that it is possible to love sugar without necessarily having to eat it.

Japanese culinary cultural and eating practices, then, present what may appear to be a fundamental contradiction. Although sweets are de-emphasized in stereotypical Western views of Japanese cuisine, which tend to focus on such items as rice and sushi, sweets have a deep and pervasive presence in Japanese life in ways that are arguably more culturally elaborated than what one finds in countries such as the United States. Row upon row of neatly wrapped boxes of sweets are found in contexts where they would be out of place elsewhere, such as highway rest stops, train stations, and museum gift shops. In Kyoto, in the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, over ten thousand people daily attend each of three major chocolate exhibitions in major department stores, featuring over a hundred exhibitors from around the world. The fifth most popular career goal for Japanese female high school students is "patisserie" (N-Dricom 2012). And yet, despite this passion for sweets, Japan has the lowest rates of obesity of any developed country. It is, thus, ironic that in Japan high school girls as thin as supermodels have fantasies

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of working in cake shops, while in the United States people dream of being as thin as supermodels while lamenting the ways in which the overabundance of cake, candy, and super-sized soda pop overdetermines our waistlines.

This paper draws on anthropological fieldwork carried out from 2011 to the present, using a variety of ethnographic methods ranging from approximately sixty qualitative interviews on attitudes and practices regarding food generally and sweets in particular, a quantitative survey on food preferences and cravings, and informal methods of participant observation. Consonant with both of the methods employed and with the goals of the paper, I move between a rich description of Japanese sweets and the cultural beliefs surrounding them and a discussion of the health-related question of the role of sweets in an obesity epidemic found widely across the world, yet not in Japan. This is not to suggest that, in my view, lower obesity rates in Japan are directly attributable to the lower consumption of sugar. There are of course many factors that contribute to low obesity rates in Japan—ranging from body aesthetics to social pressure to government mandates for employers to annually measure their workers' waists—just as there are deeper causes for unprecedented rates of obesity in other milieus.

My intent is, thus, not to re-fetishize sugar in a Japanese context but rather to destabilize its fetishization elsewhere. That is, both scholarship and beliefs expressed in popular and political venues in the United States and Europe appear to necessitate that the Japanese *should* be obese, because this is portrayed as a natural and unavoidable consequence of ready access to affordable sugar—and yet they are not obese. Could it be that the Japanese (unlike essentially all other humans) simply for some reason do not like sugar? According to my fieldwork, the Japanese not only like sweets, they love them. But perhaps they love them differently than the ways in which they are typically loved in the United States and elsewhere. Thus, in providing a detailed explication of how they are loved—types of sweets, contexts for use, and values and practices surrounding them—I aim to provide insights into how the Japanese relate to sweet things but also provide a more complex and less deterministic understanding of humans' relationship to eating generally and sweets in particular, which perhaps has implications for problems such as obesity in many other contexts around the world.

Sweets in Japan: History and Variety

Sweets in Japan take a wide variety of forms. These different types of sweets may be placed in a range of different categories, varying according to such contrasting distinctions as Japanese versus foreign and expensive/high-class sweets versus cheaper, more everyday varieties. These distinctions are not fully exclusive, however, and other factors can also affect how one defines the uses and meanings of particular types of sweets.

The archetypal sweets found in Japan are *wagashi*. The word specifically means "Japanese sweets," denoted by the prefix *wa–*, as opposed to *yôgashi* or foreign/European sweets. Both categories, of course, have complex origins that reflect Japan's relationships to other parts of the world at differing points in time. Wagashi trace their origins to courtly cuisine that entered Japanese food culture via contact with Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century (Rath 2010). Some types of sweets were present prior to this period, which appear to be influenced in part by contact with Chinese culture. These earlier sweets were included in the general category of *kashi*—snacks eaten with tea—and included both sweet and savory snacks, ranging from rice cakes to fruit to dried octopus (ibid.). While sugar was known in Japan from at least the eighth century, as in other parts of the world (Mintz 1985), it was considered to be primarily medicinal by the Japanese, who added little or no sugar to their food until the period of Portuguese influence (Rath 2010).

The Portuguese brought with them large quantities of sugar, as well as recipes for new varieties of sweets. Early versions of these are found in *The Southern Barbarians' Cookbook*, a manuscript from the seventeenth century or earlier (Rath 2010). Some of these were entirely novel introductions that remain important up through the present, such as *kasutera*, a kind of sponge cake based on the Portuguese *castella*, and *konpeito*, hard candies made from caramelized sugar. The Portuguese influence also transformed existing sweets through the addition of large amounts of sugar. Hence, many varieties that are now regarded as Japanese were developed in conjunction with this Iberian influence, including those considered the most "purely Japanese." As testimony to the allure of sweetness, even after Japan was closed to most foreign trade and influences after 1637, sugar remained one of the most important commodities for trade, carried out exclusively with the Dutch through the port of Nagasaki (Laver 2011).

While even sweets considered "Japanese" have some degree of foreign origin, those labeled as "foreign" (*yôgashi*) were introduced following the forcible reopening of Japan by Admiral Perry and his American fleet in 1854. Over the ensuing decades, which included the Meiji Reformation in which the leadership of Japan deliberately aimed to modernize along Western lines, new varieties of sweets, such as chocolate and baked goods, were also introduced into Japan. Chocolate was present in Japan from at least the 1920s, but in the popular imagination its introduction is tied to the period of occupation following World War II and the contact with

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American soldiers. It was a period of poverty and food shortages in Japan; at the same time, the presence of foreigners led to the proliferation of new items. As a consequence, Japanese who were children during the postwar period sometimes jokingly characterize themselves as the generation that chased American GIs shouting "Give me chocolate!" (although others mentioned to me having received chewing gum instead).

Recipes for wagashi (Japanese sweets) explicitly exclude non-Japanese ingredients, such as eggs, milk, and butter, using instead ingredients such as rice flour and adzuki bean paste. Sugar is the exception to this, partially because it was already common when changes in the Japanese diet—such as the introduction of beef—occurred with the deliberate Westernization in the mid-nineteenth century, and also because it would be impossible to make most wagashi without sugar, as old-style confectioners I have interviewed pointed out to me. Archetypal wagashi are not prepared for everyday use. These are typified by very elaborate and visually beautiful creations, oftentimes produced with the tea ceremony (*sadô*) in mind. Wagashi, like other aspects of the tea ceremony, are carefully and consciously designed to evoke the ephemeral beauty of the unique moment in which the ceremony occurs and to which one may never return. Essential to the appreciation of the beauty of the fleeting moment is to experience the feeling of the various seasons through multiple senses. Consequently, wagashi designs mimic aspects of the natural world that are typical of a particular time of year. For instance, in June in Kyoto when the hydrangea flower is prevalent, sweets are made to resemble them with a core of sweetened white bean paste (*shiro-an*) and delicately covered in carefully hand-cut colored petals made from agar (*kanten*). During winter months wagashi might be made to evoke snow, in the spring cherry blossom themes abound, and in the hot summer months *kinyoku kan*—bean paste goldfish, suspended in agar that resembles cool water—are popular. Notably, while the visual aspects of wagashi are carefully tailored to the occasion, the tastes differ only very subtly. Handcrafting these visually striking wagashi tends to be quite labor intensive, and they are made mainly by experts. Consequently they are fairly expensive (approximately $3.50 a piece in 2012), such that they are not widespread in everyday use, nor necessarily eaten by all sectors of society. In Kyoto, for instance—which stakes a special claim to "traditional" Japanese culture, which is displayed prominently in sweets—customers for archetypical wagashi include those individuals/families who are both wealthy and aim to stake a claim to tradition, while others may purchase them as a fancy gift or for special occasions.

In contrast, there are also a wide range of traditional Japanese sweets that are cheaper and therefore more widely eaten. Some are commonly eaten by all sectors of society according to taste preference, while others are reserved for special occasions. 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* (adzuki bean paste) to make *manju*. Manju may be eaten at any time, but are also a common treat among all sectors of society at special occasions, such as New Year's and graduations, colored a celebratory red.

Dorayaki, a sweetened chestnut filling sandwiched between two small pancakes, are also widely popular. *Dango*, rice balls that are sweetened, colored, and sometimes made into thematic shapes/forms, are eaten throughout the year and are a very common sweet in many settings. Kasutera sponge cake, discussed above, is also extremely widespread. During the time leading up to the Obon holiday—when the spirits of the ancestors are believed to return—large hard candies made into the shape of colorful flowers are prevalent even in basic grocery stores, used exclusively to leave as offerings for deceased family members. While these are some of the more popular items, the full variety of sweets are far too numerous to list.

Alongside these "Japanese sweets," yôgashi (European sweets) have also become extremely popular. Some, particularly younger Japanese, may express a preference for yôgashi over wagashi. Interestingly, one reason they give is that Japanese sweets—such as those containing the very sugary bean paste, anko—are "too sweet," which some of my informants construed both as an unpleasant taste and as an index of the sweets' unhealthiness. Many types of yôgashi have become so ubiquitous in Japan that some of them are to a great extent viewed by Japanese as their own and/or have been modified to a distinctly Japanese version, though they are recognized as not being "traditional" per se. These include both candy and baked goods. Among baked goods, one of the more popular is "Shu-cream" (choux cream, or a cream puff); adopted at least by the early twentieth century, it is now a commonplace item, and viewed by some of my informants as at least to some extent "Japanese" even though its French origins are well known (and perhaps add to its attractiveness). Candy similar to Euro-American varieties is also found in many varieties.

While items such as chocolate, doughnuts, and baked goods are sometimes found in forms that differ little from those that are common elsewhere in the world, often they come in flavorings that would be odd or unfamiliar elsewhere. Among the most popular of these is green tea (*matcha*)—which is, in fact, the second most popular ice cream flavor in Japan following vanilla. Matcha is used to flavor many traditional and nontraditional sweets—including chocolate. In fact, chocolate within

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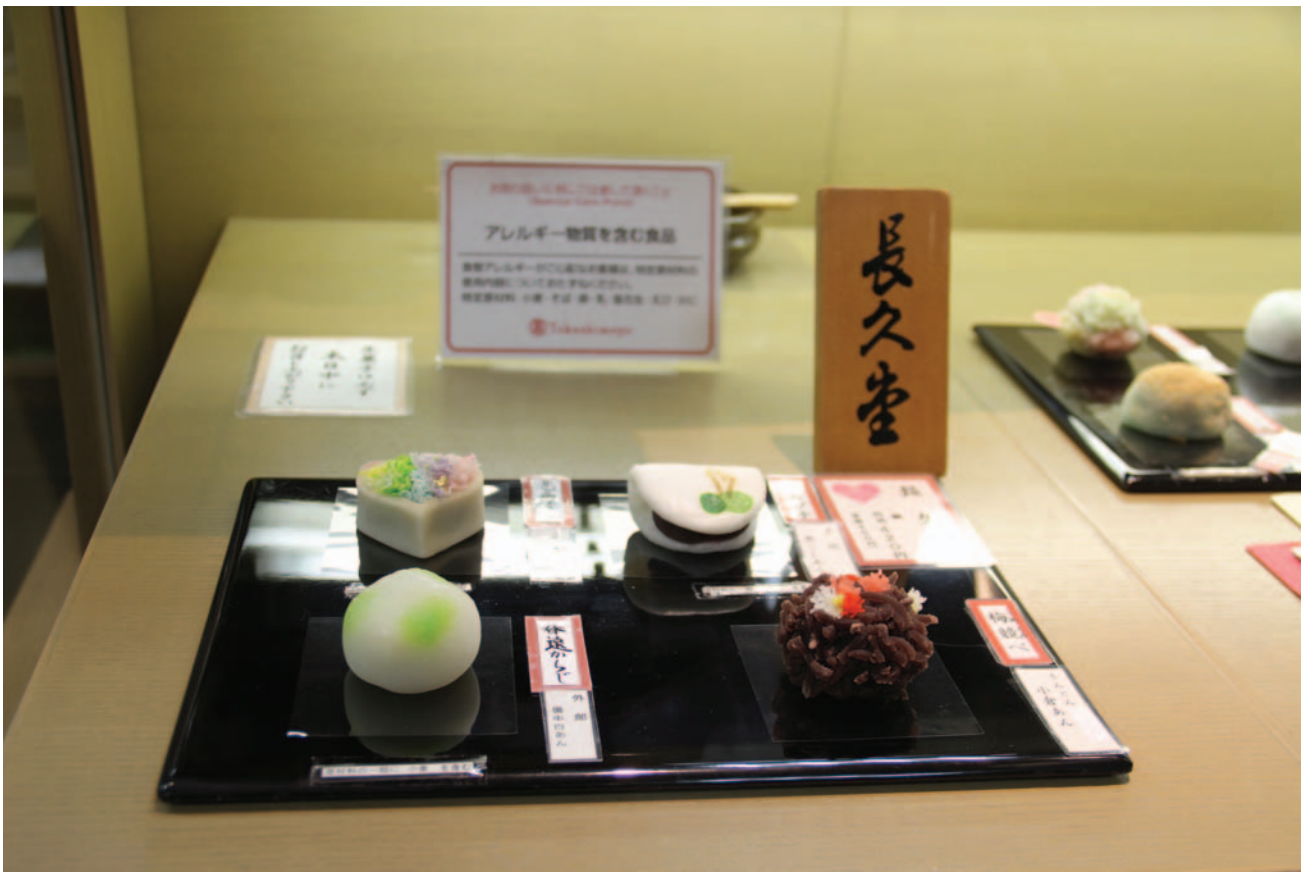

FIGURE 1: *Ornate seasonal wagashi.*
PHOTO BY JON HOLTZMAN © 2014

Japanese confectionary need not even be solely chocolate flavored; sweet 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," which resembles a Nestle's Crunch bar but is sweet potato flavored rather than chocolate flavored (as is the normal Crunky Bar). This flavoring comes from the historical popularity of confectionary made out of sweet potatoes (*imogashi*) that were widely eaten during earlier eras when sugar was expensive, and in the period following World War II when sugar was extremely scarce. In addition to flavors, and mirroring in a modest way the emphasis on the visual qualities of wagashi, Japanese chocolates often are also made into interesting shapes that would be unusual in Western nations, such as bamboo shoots or mushrooms.

Chocolate made in Japan is sold in contexts such as convenience or grocery stores; European-made chocolate is generally considered by Japanese to be of higher quality, and while it may sometimes be found in these same contexts, it is also sold in higher-end shops and department stores. Place is an inexorable part of culinary discourse in Japan, with regional identities being bound to the qualities of virtually anything that can be put in one's stomach—from sake to soba, as well as sweets—and the association of foods with national identities is similarly found not only in sweets but in many areas of contemporary Japanese cuisine, such as waffles—a form of which is sold as a snack in convenience stores as a "Belgian" waffle—and in yogurt, which is closely linked with Bulgaria (Yotova 2013). Notably, despite frequently being cited in the popular imagination as the source of the introduction of chocolate to Japan, some of my Japanese informants asserted that American chocolate is far inferior to European varieties.

This brief, and far from comprehensive, survey of Japanese sweets should serve to emphasize the considerable love that is found, individually and culturally, for sugary foods in Japan. They are ubiquitous and highly culturally elaborated, in many ways seemingly more so than in the United States or European nations. This leads to other questions regarding not only cultural issues but nutritional and health issues as well. If two premises are accepted—that sweets are prominent and

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loved in Japan, and that the negative aspects of sugar in much of Western discourse are in fact scientifically verifiable—then should not the pervasiveness and love of sweets in Japan be linked to health problems in that country? This is the question to which I now turn.

Sugar in Comparative Perspective

Few food items have received as much attention, as much love, and as much scorn as sugar. Within anthropology, sugar is best known from Sidney Mintz's (1985) extraordinary study of the history of sugar in the Atlantic world and as an early driver of both the global capitalist world system and the Industrial Revolution in England in particular. Mintz traces sugar's rise from a rare and little known food item in medieval times, to a luxury item available to the wealthy, to a necessity that by the nineteenth century formed a staple food for the British working classes. Fundamental to his analysis, which is as well seminal in the anthropological study of food, is the interplay between the material aspects of sugar and the ways that these take on different types and levels of significance within different cultural and historical milieus. Stated most simply, the importance of sugar cannot be explained solely by the fact that it is sweet. Mintz posits an innate human (or perhaps even primate) desire for sugar (see also Jerome 1977), but holds that this is merely a starting point for richly explicating the historical, cultural, and political economic contingencies that structured its emergence as a food of mass consumption and conversely made it a central driver in shaping the capitalist world system.

In a broader sense, Mintz and others (e.g., Farquhar 2002) hold that despite the universal power that sweetness or other fundamental aspects of food—whether sensory or nutritional—have in human experience, it is necessary to understand how human responses to these are shaped and given meaning in particular cultural and historical contexts. Other scholarship in anthropology and related fields takes culturally constructed approaches to the experience of food a step further, suggesting that even what are regarded as basic human sensory experiences of taste are highly culturally mediated, since even what hard sciences construe as "basic tastes" may be culturally constructed out of a far greater array of sensory possibilities than is encompassed within the four or five tastes that are acknowledged in Western science (Howes 1991, 2003; Sutton 2010; Trubek 2008), or because even these basic tastes may be experienced in ways that are radically at odds with how biologically oriented science assumes them to be (Mol 2012).

This anthropological perspective, emphasizing the culturally constructed nature of human responses to sugar, is significantly at odds with perspectives from many other scientific fields, as well as prominent perspectives in popular culture and politics, particularly in the United States. The central strand in these discourses is the demonization of sugar, and the examples of this demonization are many. One need only look at such developments as the "soda tax" or the ban on sizes of sweetened drinks that are deemed excessively large. These are based on the assumption that sugar itself is the problem. It is portrayed as a dangerous food that needs to be controlled because consumers are unable to control it for themselves.

These popular and political discourses mirror perspectives from fields ranging from psychology to nutrition to public health that attribute to sugar a unique and intrinsic power over humans. Many psychological approaches posit a rather deterministic view of sugar in a variety of ways, whether by highlighting the parallels between the neurological response to sugar and psychoactive drugs or by suggesting a rather hardwired attraction to sweetness as an "honest indicator" of the caloric value of food, which may have been adaptive in the course of human evolution when calories were purportedly at a premium. Sugar has been purported to have properties that contribute to the management of pain (Ventura and Mennella 2011), while relatedly neuroscientists have found sugar to stimulate the same receptors as opioids in the brain (e.g., Colantuoni et al. 2002; Tanda and Di Chiara 1998). Similarly, a range of longitudinal studies have shown that not only do drug users and those with family histories of drug use (e.g., tobacco, cocaine, opioids, amphetamines, alcohol) have stronger preferences for sweets, but that those children with higher preferences for sweets have greater tendencies toward drug use/abuse later in life (Carrolla et al. 2008). Within the public health literature, increased access to sugar as a nation's per capita GDP increases is viewed as one of the key aspects of a "nutritional transition" linked to an almost inevitable rise in obesity and other chronic diseases in areas across the globe (Popkin 2009; cf. Piperata 2007). Finally, although now largely disproven (Wolraich et al. 1995; FAO 1998), popular scientific/pseudo scientific discourses continue to link sugar use to hyperactivity and similar maladies in children. Such perspectives portray sugar as little different than an illicit drug—a comparison that many studies make openly. In essence, the message of these discourses goes something like this: Once you're hooked, you're hooked; and when you're hooked, you'll most likely put on weight, and probably a lot of it.

In some senses, a consonance can be found between the supposed intrinsic power of sweetness and the profound love of sweets illustrated by the Japanese examples detailed above. And yet, there is a striking difference in that the love of sweets

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is not paired with overconsumption. If public portrayals of sugar often focus on excessive consumption, there is an undercurrent of it being essentially "unsafe at any level," if only because of the assertion that humans cannot control the level of their consumption if they are afforded unfettered access. Yet, counter to these deterministic views of the unhealthiness of sugar, Japan—despite high wealth levels and ready and affordable access to sugary foods—is a notable outlier to global obesity trends, with a rate of about 3.2 percent (OECD 2005). Per capita consumption of sugar, when compared to other wealthy nations, is also considerably lower—indeed, less than half that of the United States—though precise measures of absolute consumption vary; it has been calculated most recently as 17.2 kilos per year and declining (Malmo University n.d.).

Indeed, Japan stands in stark contrast to the notion that increased access to sugar leads inevitably to both excessive sugar consumption and heightened rates of obesity. Despite Japan's rapid rise in wealth during the postwar economic boom—which was accompanied by a modest and brief rise in obesity, which has since been reversed—Japan's obesity rates remain among the lowest in the world, with current per capita daily caloric consumption actually having fallen in recent years to levels found during what have been characterized as the "famine years" (Aldous 2010) of the immediate postwar period after a modest rise in the 1960s and 1970s—an average of 1,861 per capita calories per day in 2009, compared with 1,857 calories in 1947 (Government of Japan 1950, 2010). Economic constraints would not appear to be a major factor here, since sweets and sweetened drinks are widely available and only nominally costlier than in the United States.

There are multiple ways to resolve this seeming contradiction. One basic question to ask might be if the demonization of sugar is misplaced. That is, perhaps there is likely much more at play in the global obesity epidemic than excessive consumption of sugar, and there might be much more that contributes to low levels of obesity in Japan than the controlled consumption of a food labeled problematically uncontrollable in broad discourse. Yet given the prominence of sugar in health and obesity debates, it is important to focus upon notable processes in the cultural and societal context that shape the Japanese uses of sweets. How and why do the Japanese avoid the presumed inevitable pressure of sugar, enjoying sweets in a way that is perhaps more passionate, and but also certainly more moderate, than in Western countries, particularly the United States? I now turn to a discussion of sweets within social and cultural practices in Japan, exploring these in their own right but also addressing the seeming contradiction of "passionate moderation" found in Japanese sugar consumption.

Sweets in Japanese Practice

One of the more interesting sweet-centered Japanese institutions is the cake Viking. "Viking" (*baikingu*) is the Japanese term for any type of buffet. The word developed with the introduction (purportedly in the 1950s) of cuisine from Scandinavia. When it was apparent that the word "smorgasbord" was largely unpronounceable by Japanese speakers, the word Viking took its place. A cake Viking is, then, an all-you-can-eat dessert buffet, with the caveat that it is timed—typically 85 minutes during nonpeak times and 75 minutes during peak hours, such as Sunday afternoons. Upon entering, a time ticket is placed on one's table, and when it expires one pays and leaves.

Japanese behaviors I have observed in this setting are markedly different from those that are both normative and typical in the United States. In the United States, many see this type of buffet as a challenge, pitting the value of the food against the ability of one's stomach to contain it. Americans in particular are notable for the desire to prove that "they aren't making money off me"—that is, using the opportunity to eat enough food so that the cost of it to the restaurant is greater than what the diner paid to dine. While this is not to say that every American attempts to overeat to get "full value," this is a common theme in everyday life, and overeating at buffets is common. The statements of Americans to whom I have described the setup of cake Vikings have reinforced my own perceptions about a common American response to the timing aspect: that it would provide an additional challenge to eat more and faster.

Japanese whom I have observed or dined with at cake Vikings show no evidence of overindulgence. While it is likely that they consume more calories and more sweets than they would at a normal meal, their eating behavior appears to be measured. They tend to take and eat that which they specifically want, and do not appear to have (nor do informants express) a need to eat things simply because they are there. There is also a strong emphasis—at Vikings and in Japan generally—on avoiding food wastage. Thus, for instance, at one such establishment I visited in 2014 there was a sign posted (likely partially humorously) telling customers that if they still had food on their plates when their time ran out, they would be charged double.

This sign illustrates an interesting tension in Japanese eating behavior, and one that provides notable contrasts to commonplace Western notions about appetite. In Japan there is a decided emphasis on eating all of one's food. The importance of finishing one's food is illustrated in several different examples. Many informants discuss their parents emphasizing

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that there are "a million gods in every grain of rice," because (stemming from traditional Shinto beliefs) diverse elements of nature are necessarily involved in growing a successful rice crop. Consequently, it is construed as almost sacrilegious to throw food away. As Allison (1991) has beautifully described, and as my own informants have reiterated, there is a pronounced emphasis in Japanese schools on children finishing their food. In Allison's description (my informants have described variations of this), no student can go out to recess until every student has finished their lunch, such that not eating one's lunch undermines the group, and subjects one to the ire of the group. In my research, informants have reported that some students experience severe emotional distress due to the need to finish their lunch.

The optimal behavior, then, is to take no more than you wish to eat, so that you will have no difficulty finishing it. Interestingly, from this perspective, satiety—the experience of feeling full—is to a great extent construed in negative terms, as something to be avoided, since becoming full before finishing what is on one's plate means leaving food on one's plate. In contrast to elsewhere in the world, where satiety is portrayed as pleasant or desirable—even to the point of feeling like one might burst, as is often associated with the holiday meal at American Thanksgivings—the Japanese report negative experiences associated with being "too full" and to some extent anxiety about becoming too full. Popular discourses encourage Japanese to be attuned to the sensation of their stomachs. One example of this is the notion of *hara hachi bu*—to eat until one is 8/10s full.

The Japanese love of sweets is not, then, tied to a commensurate desire to overindulge in them. Indeed, to some extent it is not necessary to indulge at all. One key to understanding Japanese excitement about sweets is that the importance of sweets is tied perhaps much more to their exchange value than their use value. The sometimes staggering cultural elaboration and importance afforded to sweets is, in fact, most clearly displayed in sweets that are purchased not to be eaten but to be given away. This is seen, for instance, in the highly important practice of *omiyage*, gifts from travel. If one has traveled it is typically essential that one returns with gifts. In many contexts and interactions it is important to bring a gift (e.g., to a meeting at a child's school) where it would not typically be done in the United States. It is common for coworkers to make sure that they bring back something to share after a trip; some informants even claim that they will go on trips mainly for the purpose of returning with omiyage. Omiyage reflect the regional specialties of different localities. And indeed, as travel and an awareness of regional identities has become increasingly common, some regions that previously did not have specialties have seen the need to invent them, as will be shown shortly.

While omiyage are not exclusively foodstuffs, they are predominantly so. Similarly although they are not always sweets (pickled vegetables and sundry other foods are not unusual), sweets are the overwhelming common form. This to a great extent accounts for the ubiquity of sweets in places that would seem unusual in the United States. For example, the gift shop of an American aquarium would be unlikely to feature rows of sweets, whereas in Japan it would be commonplace to find such rows of sweets wrapped in packages with various oceanic themes in an aquarium gift shop. Similarly, the ubiquitous presence of sweets in any place associated with travel—train stations, highway rest stops, and airports—relates largely to the fact that they represent convenient spots to buy omiyage.

Omiyage almost always have a regional theme—they tell a story about where you were to the receiver of the gift—though it is very often in the packaging or presentation. For instance, in Shiga, known for its production of ceramic statues of the *tanuki* (the raccoon dog, which is a popular figure of luck and prosperity), tanuki-shaped *dango* (a cookie-like sweet) are sold, which are little different in taste from the deer poop-shaped dango from Nara (famous for its herds of deer that are allowed to wander the city). In Hyogo Prefecture, known for dairy production, I found among many regional items at a rest stop a box of eight "milk doughnuts," caringly wrapped with a picture of grazing cows and the English words "Spend some satisfactory time with an intimate companion." That so much romance, sentiment, and a sense of place could be attributed to a box that simply contained eight doughnuts exemplifies the element of fantasy that permeates Japanese sweets, and omiyage in particular. Like other gifted sweets in Japan, there is perhaps more imagination in such a box than there is sugar.

Much of the importance of sweets, then, lies in their role in gift-giving. But notably sweets can also be "the perfect gift," in both ironic and non-ironic aspects of the term. The ironic meaning refers to, or is exemplified by a perhaps apocryphal story of an American company that had developed a new kitchen gadget. It turned out that testing showed the item performed poorly. However, the company decided to go ahead and market it because, despite the fact that it did not do what it was supposed to, it "made the perfect gift." Anyone living in a society with mass-produced goods and practices of gift-giving has no doubt received (and perhaps has a closetful) of gifts they did not actually want. Similarly, there are many Japanese who do not particularly like sweets. Although someone who knows the receiver well may select something else, for the most part whether or not someone actually likes sweets does

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FIGURE 2: *Long rows of sweets fill the gift shop at the Kyoto Tower.*
PHOTO BY JON HOLTZMAN © 2012

not change the status of sweets as "the perfect gift." To the extent that sweets are a quintessential gift, it can never really be a faux pas, or create social awkwardness, to gift them in the sense that Western "bad gifts" might. Moreover, since almost everyone will have friends, coworkers, or family members who enjoy sweets, and because sweets are typically shared, sweets will almost always be welcome even by someone who does not particularly like them.

Sweets being "the perfect gift" in its ironic sense is perhaps best exemplified in the phenomenon of Valentine's Day, a Western holiday that has been enthusiastically adopted in Japan, particularly in recent decades. Chocolate companies began promoting the holiday in the postwar period, though based on the varying estimates of different informants it did not seriously take hold until perhaps the 1970s. The Japanese version of Valentine's Day involves the widespread gifting of chocolate from women to men—never the other way around, though there is another holiday in March (White Day) when men are expected to reciprocate to those who have given them chocolate. The archetypal form of Valentine's chocolate giving is known as *giri choco*—obligation chocolate—in which women are expected to give gifts of chocolate to male

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coworkers, particularly those at a higher level of authority. This can result in rather expensive chocolate purchases, depending on the size of the office/school and the number of men one is obligated to buy for.

Many women informants suggest that during the boom years of the Japanese economy in the 1970s and 1980s they enjoyed the holiday, but that as the economy sputtered, the expense of tens or even hundreds of dollars became a burden—hence the term "obligation chocolate," in that it is not necessarily given out of heartfelt sentiment. Nevertheless, despite some resentment there remains a staggering degree of cultural energy put into the holiday, and large numbers of women engage with it enthusiastically. In 2014, for instance, three different department stores in Kyoto had chocolate exhibitions in the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, with over a hundred exhibitors—many from Europe—selling and displaying every manner of high-end chocolate. Organizers to whom I spoke at the exhibitions estimated that they had approximately twenty thousand visitors every day, with about half of them making purchases. The customers at these exhibitions tended to be adult women, who have the income to spend on gift boxes that normally range from 1,000–3,500 yen (roughly $10–$35). Teenagers and college students, in contrast, generally prefer to make their own confections, both because it is more economical and because they may believe that homemade confections better express their feelings. Leading up to the holiday, then, many stores have large sections devoted to kits for making attractive Valentine's confections and are packed with teenagers/young women purchasing them. Pop culture magazines aimed at teenage girls have detailed and visually rich recipes that describe not only how to make the items, but how much they will cost, how many people they can gift with them, and what type of item is appropriate for what type of recipient, depending on how close the giver feels to the recipient and what types of emotions the giver wants to express.

It is notable that, despite this high level of energy and interest devoted to giving men chocolate, men by and large do not have a great deal of interest in or liking for chocolate. Among teenage boys the dynamic is slightly different. They may have more of a tendency than adult men to like sweets, and regard the number of gifts they receive as a reflection of their popularity. However, by and large, chocolate is given because that is what you give on Valentine's, not because men like chocolate and wish to receive it. While in fact some men do like chocolate or sweets more generally, sweets tend to be a highly gendered and feminine food, both traditionally and to a great extent still in Japan today.[3] Linguistically, even the connotations of the word "sweet" itself (*amai*) differ significantly from the meanings of the English equivalent.

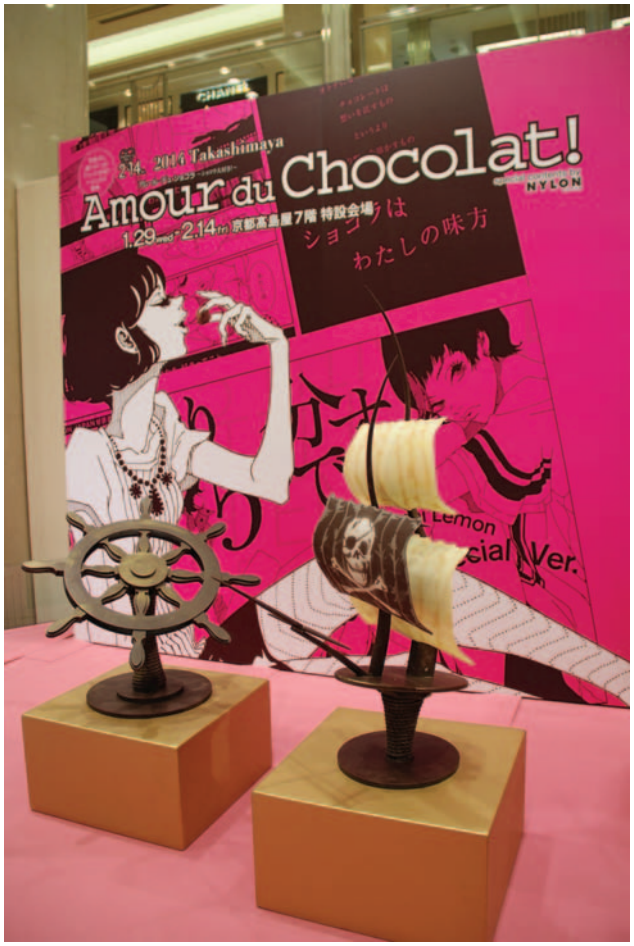

FIGURE 3: *Chocolate sculptures at the entrance of a Valentine's chocolate exhibition.*
PHOTO BY JON HOLTZMAN © 2014

Whereas the English "sweet" is unambiguously positive, *amai* is markedly ambivalent, being positive in some contexts but implying weakness, sloppiness, or lack of effort in others (Hasegawa 2008). Notably Doi (2005) has expounded on the linguistic and psychological connections between sweetness (*amai*) and what he terms "need-love," or love based in weakness or dependency (*amae*), exemplified in the image of the attachment of puppies to their mother—a decidedly nonmasculine image.

The associations of sweetness with weakness and dependency are most evident in the overwhelming association of sweets with women and children and the general idea that men forgo sweets in favor of alcohol (Ashkenazi and Jacobs 2000). While these attitudes/preferences/stereotypes have changed somewhat, they remain significant. As for popular culture examples in this regard, patrons at cake Vikings, based on my observations, are greatly skewed toward women, with few men in attendance, and those few always accompa-

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nying wives or families (as opposed to significant numbers of all-female groups, or women with their children).

Consequently, with respect to Valentine's Day, the imperative to give chocolate is somewhat counterintuitive, since it does not figure among items that are stereotypically liked by men, and many Japanese men, in fact, do not particularly like sweets. Many men whom I interviewed expressed a lack of interest, or even disdain, for the holiday. Some offices have now begun to ban giving out giri choco, and some men claim to politely refuse the gifts because they do not like the obligations that the practice places on women or the expectation of reciprocity it entails. Most women today express reticence about the practice of giri choco, though this ranges from outright hostility to simply claiming to somewhat limit their gifting. Such claims are not, however, always convincing. For instance, one younger woman told me in 2011 that she had only given giri choco to those people who she sincerely felt had especially helped her in her studies that year—about 15–20 male professors.

Alongside giri choco, there are other types of chocolate gifts that are given at Valentine's Day. Unlike giri choco, which is an obligation to someone who is socially somewhat distant, some women/girls will also give *honmei choco* (true feeling chocolate) to a husband or boyfriend, or someone in whom they have a romantic interest. This chocolate is considered to be given with sincerity and is usually of a higher quality than giri choco. In fact, a honmei gift is less likely to be chocolate, since there is a greater likelihood of knowing the recipient's tastes and of wanting to give them something they will truly like. For instance, one younger woman described how after some years her mother began to give her father *senbei* (savory rice crackers) on Valentine's because he does not like sweets. Another woman described baking a cake for her husband made with *okara* (a high fiber byproduct of tofu-making) because he requested a healthy option out of concern for a recent weight gain. Girls, and some younger women, may also exchange *tomo choco* (friend chocolate) among themselves. Finally, there is also a category of *jibun choco* (chocolate for oneself). Some female informants note that they take the opportunity of the array of new and interesting chocolates marketed around Valentine's Day to purchase the best chocolates for themselves. They explain that getting the best chocolate for themselves is appropriate because they are the true lovers, and hence connoisseurs, of chocolate, whereas inferior chocolate is fine for men, because they are assumed to not be able to differentiate between high- and low-quality chocolate.

As this last example illustrates, the value of chocolate (and sweets more broadly) is not necessarily tied to taste or preference. It may be the right thing to purchase chocolate even for people who do not actually like it, and consequently there is no need to purchase chocolate that is especially good. With this in mind I move toward the conclusion, which discusses how to understand the role of sweets in Japan and some of the contradictions that invariably arise.

Loving Sweets Differently

Why is the Japanese per capita consumption of sugar so much less than most comparably wealthy countries? Why has the Japanese passion for sugar not led to obesity in the way that the public health literature claims it should, and that neuroscience implies should be nearly impossible to avoid considering the irresistibility of sugar? Attempting to answer these questions is important not only for understanding the particularities of the cultural phenomenon of sweets in Japan, but moreover in considering what it may reveal with regard to achieving a healthier relationship to sugar than what is often seen in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

There are no simple or definitive answers to these questions. One possibility is that—despite the love of sugar—it is not, as a food, actually loved as much in Japan as it may be elsewhere. This itself would be significant, given the rather deterministic statements that are frequently made about sugar. As noted above, sweetness is culturally constructed in quite different ways in Japan than in at least most Western societies, with metaphorical associations to weakness or to things being done poorly. As Sutton (2010) and others have shown in anthropology, and others have shown in psychology (e.g., Gal, Wheller, and Shiv 2007), these types of synesthesiac perceptions can affect sensory responses to food. Japanese discussions of their food preferences do suggest that sugar is not an unabashedly desirable food. While most of my informants express a liking for sweets, they frequently express a dislike for versions that are "too sweet." For instance, many informants indicate that, although they like cake, they prefer "Japanese cakes" (which are ostensibly Japanese versions of Western cakes) to European cakes because the latter are excessively sweet.

Notably in this regard, in a survey I conducted on Japanese food preferences and cravings in 2014, sweets do not actually rank especially high. In the United States and elsewhere sweet and fatty foods typically are ranked the highest, and chocolate—which fits in each of these categories—is the most frequently craved food (e.g. White et al 2002; Rogers and Smit 2000). In contrast, by far the most commonly craved food in my survey was rice, with 57 of 130 respondents expressing a rice craving, followed closely by psychoactive drinks (beer, coffee, and hot tea). Among true foods, the next

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most craved items were salad, ramen, curry rice (viewed as a distinct dish from regular "rice"), Chinese-style deep-fried chicken, sashimi, and so on. Chocolate, the most craved sweet, ranked eighth among food cravings, trailing items such as Japanese pickles (*tsukemono*) and ramen. Notably, the vast majority of chocolate cravers were young women. However, because they expressed more cravings in general, chocolate still was significantly less craved than rice, coffee, beer, and tea, while on par with items such as miso soup, salad, fried chicken, and curry rice.

It is also possible that a concern with health and weight may play a significant role in Japanese attitudes toward sugar, and in their having the lowest rates of obesity among all wealthy nations. Indeed, there are many ways in which Japanese, both individually and at the level of public policy, are particularly concerned with health and weight. Japan actually has standards for BMI (body mass index) that are different from the rest of the world. According to international standards a BMI of 30 marks obesity, whereas in Japan it is a BMI of 25 (Government of Japan 2000). Japanese policy makers, in statements that are echoed by individuals, claim that this different standard is necessary due to the belief (to my knowledge that is not backed by much scientific evidence) that Japanese are particularly susceptible to diabetes. Being overweight is tagged with the term "metabo syndrome," a malady largely unknown elsewhere in the world. In order to prevent diabetes and test for metabo syndrome workers are required to have their waists measured annually, with waists larger than 33.5 inches for men and 34.4 inches for women triggering a range of government actions—dietary guidance and monitoring at an individual level and potential penalties for their employers. Thus, it is not simply that sweets are eaten less. Food itself, anything containing calories, is potentially fraught. As noted earlier, Japanese today actually consume fewer calories per capita than they did during the postwar years that are popularly regarded as famine years.

To some extent, then, this suggests a somewhat different possibility: That there is simply such a significant concern with health that this is the primary driver of low levels of obesity and the lower consumption of all high-calorie foods. This would suggest that there is nothing special about sugar. Yet, it must also be considered that there *is* something special about sugar, and moreover something special about Japanese responses to it. The public health and neuroscience literature suggests that there is something special about sugar, that it has a unique power which makes it almost impossible to control once it has been let loose. The fact that Japanese do control it is, therefore, worthy of further consideration.

There is a deep complexity to the Japanese relationship with sweet things, containing seeming contradictions that show that the significance of food goes far beyond its qualities as an object of ingestion. In a sense there is a great love of sweets in Japan, but also an impulse to avoid them. Japanese show us that there is much more to sugar—as there is, of course, to food more generally—than simply the eating of it. Even if many Japanese may not find it the perfect food to eat, it is typically the perfect gift for others—even if those others, ironically, may similarly not find it the perfect food to eat. Alongside these social dimensions are rich aesthetic ones. It is not merely that Japanese sweets of all types range from attractively packaged to visually stunning: this fact is moreover essential to the varied life of sweets in Japan as well as to the ways in which satisfaction from sweets can be attained in significant ways just by looking. These intricacies may tell us not only about sugar, our responses to it, and how even a passion for sweets does not necessarily lead to overeating them, but also lead us to deeper questions about the varied and complex senses through which humans may be said to "consume" food.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

1. Though full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, her statement intriguingly mirrors the psychological findings of Morewedge (2010), which suggest that satiety can be produced merely through imagined rather than real consumption.
2. For a full empirical critique of this massively extensive popular culture notion see Rogers and Smit (2000).
3. In their earliest inception, when sugar was rare and expensive, sweets were more commonly the purview of noblemen, but this has been all but forgotten in Japan today.

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