Japan Men Rush To Buy Candy, Panties for White Day

By Catherine Rosair

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This Sunday is "White Day" in Japan when thousands of women can expect to receive lavishly wrapped gifts of white chocolate, handkerchiefs or panties, some from men they hardly know. A spontaneous outpouring of rapturous romance? Or cynical exploitation by rapacious manufacturers? Whatever your viewpoint, Japanese men will have spent more than $300 million by March 14 on White Day presents for wives, mistresses or girlfriends, real or admired from afar.

It is widely believed that White Day was invented in the late 1970s by a candy-maker in Nagoya as an occasion for men to repay their lady-loves for Valentine gifts the previous month. Japan has developed its own, distinctive tradition for Valentine's Day, when women alone lavish chocolates and other presents on their sweethearts, or even on men they work with. The confectionery industry saw a lost opportunity here and firms such as chocolate maker Morozoff began promoting White Day in 1978. Handkerchiefs became an alternative gift idea. By 1991, the phenomenon had grown to the point where, according to a survey by the Osaka Marketing Information Research Office, Japanese men spent $330 million on White Day gifts. The average unmarried office employee shelled out $105 on women friends and colleagues, the survey showed. Yumi, who has worked in an office for 14 years, estimates her White Day handkerchief collection now exceeds 80.

Lingerie makers jumped on the bandwagon in 1985 and they too now furiously promote the festival. For 1993, one manufacturer, Wacoal, offers hot pink T-back knickers with the slogan "Intellectual Sexy Elegance." Another pair of panties, in red high-cut lace, is emblazoned "I Want to Express my Sober Feelings for You." A third depicts seeds for "planting together," while perhaps the smartest gift box proclaims "Your Inner Charms are Best Brought Out with Silk."

Wacoal says White Day panty sales rise each year, and expects to sell more than 250,000 pairs ahead of this weekend through department stores alone. Chocolate makers too are confident sales will resist the economic slowdown. Morozoff spokesman Yoshio Ishihara said it expects 1993 sales to top 1992. "People will go on buying because it's White Day after all. White Day gifts aren't very expensive."

A lot of people balk, however, at feeling obliged to give presents for a phony, manufactured "occasion." "Many women resent having to go through this romantic charade, they want to give up the money-wasting habit," said 25-year-old Reiko. "I tried to quit last year--but in vain. I got another 10 handkerchiefs on White Day. So, not surprisingly, I gave out 10 Valentine presents this year," she said.

The staff of Calcium House, Kyoto's biggest homosexual bar, who lose out both ways? "As gays, of course, we give presents to men on Valentine's Day," said Yoshimasa Kajuura, one of the all-male staff. "We have to go along with Japanese tradition. "But the funny thing is we never get anything back on White Day--nothing!"

Valentine's Day is a bonanza for some. Last year fans sent 35 truckloads of chocolates to Johnny's management agency, Japan's leading creator of teen idols, as well as hundreds of thousands of cards. A company spokesman said at least half were addressed to its seven-member roller-skating pop group, Hikari Genji.

A 1992 Wacoal survey found that men aged between 30 and 34 considered Valentine's Day a more important event than family birthdays or even their own wedding anniversary.