Chocolate and the Meaning of Valentine's Day in Japan

George H. Lewis

It began, fittingly, with a communication from Paris, the capital of romance, in 1957. The then-president of the Mary Chocolate Company in Japan received a letter from a friend stating, "there is a holiday called Valentine's Day in this country, and people confess love through presenting
flowers, cards, and chocolate.”

Being in the chocolate business, the receiver of this missive had little interest in flowers and cards, but he immediately felt the Western holiday held promise for the Japanese market. Consequently, in 1958, Mary Chocolate began advertising Valentine’s Day in Japan as “the only day of the year a woman confesses her love through presenting chocolate.”

According to a company spokesperson, this promotion of a new holiday was less than an instant success: “During one week we sold only about three chocolates worth 170 yen at that time.” Yet, with the persistence characteristic of the Japanese, Mary and the other large chocolate companies joined forces with major department stores, such as Mitsukoshi, in popularizing this new-to-Japan holiday. Events such as chocolate-making classes and “Valentine Post Offices,” which advertised delivery of chocolates (at store expense) on February 14, were sponsored.

Today, what was sparked by a passing comment from Paris has become a national passion. Valentine’s Day is a major festive occasion in Japan and accounts for over 10 percent of the chocolate industry’s annual sales—a remarkable figure in a country in which gift giving is traditionally done at oseibo (year’s end) and in ochugen (midsummer). What is it about Valentine’s Day that has allowed this holiday to be so conveniently molded to Japanese cultural needs and so popular with the people?

Valentine’s Day comes to Japan

Valentine’s Day was initially just one of a large number of Western cultural constructs the Japanese were attracted to after World War II. Hungry for Western ideas and culturally disrupted by the swift social and economic changes the war and occupation had brought, the Japanese were interested in Western ideas of individualism and free personal expression. Their society had traditionally esteemed subordination of the individual for the good of the group.
From jazz to James Dean, Western artifacts that reflected these new ideas were popularized and copied in Japanese culture. Western gift-giving holidays—Christmas, Mother's Day, birthdays, Valentine's Day—were also of great interest to the Japanese because, as anthropologist Harumi Befu has pointed out, these institutionalized Western forms of individual-to-individual gift giving were desirable in a "new" and modernizing Japan that had traditionally defined gift giving only as a stylized, group-oriented, and household-encumbering activity.

Valentine's Day was appealing not only because of its emphasis on individual gift giving but also because of its connection to the Western concept of romantic love. As John and Asako McKinstry have pointed out in their analysis of Japanese advice columns, the concept of love as a part of the preliminary marriage process, rather than as extraneous to marriage, was another idea imported by Japan after World War II. By the late 1950s, romantic love had gained a new legitimacy in Japan, with *ren'ai kekkon* (marriage for love) becoming acceptable in place of the traditional *mitai kekkon* (arranged marriage). There could be no better symbolic expression of this concept than the Western holiday of February 14.

Thus, by the late 1950s, the cultural stage had been set on which the Japanese chocolate companies could begin to pitch their promotional appeals about this "new" Western holiday, emphasizing—of course—the importance of giving candy (specifically, chocolate) to loved ones on this occasion. But although the companies were clear about the importance of chocolate, at first there was some cultural confusion as to who should give it to whom. Fujiya Company, in instructing its retail stores on this new holiday, felt heart-shaped chocolates should be given to lovers, intimate friends, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and admired teachers—suggestions that imply most chocolate should be given to women, especially members of the family. On the other hand, Mary Chocolate, as we have seen, advertised Valentine's Day as appropriate for women to "confess love through presenting chocolate," presumably to men. Finally, Morinaga Company, in its early promotions, suggested women should buy chocolates and give them to men but, in its ads, depicted a woman eating the chocolate herself!

In sum, how Valentine's Day was to be celebrated in Japan was not at all clear at the beginning. The chocolate companies, by their early appropriation of the holiday as a potential marketing tool, focused Japanese attention on chocolate as the appropriate gift to give, rather than written or printed communications of affection. But who should give chocolate to whom was an open question, not to be completely agreed upon for a decade or so of cultural negotiation. But by the latter half of the 1970s, the Japanese had settled on exclusively female-to-male gift giv-
ing as the appropriate Valentine's Day form, due in part, no doubt, to the fact that, in general, women in Japan have traditionally been the buyers of sweets. The influential chocolate companies already had their attention.

Women and chocolate

There is a good case to be made that, in Japan, sweetness and even sweets themselves represent dependency relationships. The Japanese word for sweet is amai and for candy is amaimono. The word amai (sweet) and the word amae (dependency) each derive from the same root. According to studies by Japanese psychologists such as Takeo Doi, the Japanese connect these two and characterize dependency relationships as “sweet” in nature. In studies of gender association, it has been found that the Japanese most often associate sweets with women and children, while connecting men to alcohol. Walter Edwards, in his examination of the rituals of Japanese wedding ceremonies, has found that women are assumed to like and be drawn to cakes, pastries, candies, and other sweets; men, it is assumed, will like and often consume alcohol. These gender connections are so strongly held that, in Japan, if a man does not drink alcohol but prefers sweets, there may be questions raised about his masculinity. One of Edwards’ conclusions is that the traditional association of sweets with women and children in Japan is one of a number of symbolic indicators of their dependent status in that society.

Understanding this, it is not surprising that women have always been the buyers of chocolates and that the companies have targeted their sales pitches surrounding this “new” gift-giving holiday to women. It also suggests why there was such initial cultural confusion over whom to give these sweet gifts to. Chocolate is clearly the province of women, so it makes sense that they should buy it. However, if the gifts are cross-gender, as in the West, men—who should not care for sweets, possibly even seeing them as threats to their masculinity—may not be, culturally, the best choice as recipient. And yet, the gift must be given. What to do?

In Japan, although they are now common, chocolates still carry a connotation of being a Western sweet, in contrast to the more traditional Japanese sweets, often made of bean paste, pounded rice, and other such familiar dietary staples. The Mary Chocolate Company, for example, has a common English corporate name
Western Origins of Valentine's Day

In the Western world, Valentine's Day was observed as long ago as during the Roman occupation of the British Isles. According to the American Book of Days, the original connection between Saint Valentine and a lovers festival was quite likely accidental. Saint Valentine was martyred on February 14 in A.D. 270, and his name became associated with the Roman spring festival of Lupercalia, which was held on February 15. This festival, with its theme of fertility, apparently involved putting the names of young women into an urn, to be drawn out by men for "beloved of the year" pairing. Frank Staff, in The Valentine and Its Origins, notes the significance of a popular medieval belief that mid-February was the time birds paired for mating and that the associated idea of love-on-wings became connected to Saint Valentine and human lovers during that period.

Whatever its true origin, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Valentine's Day had become a popular holiday, especially in Great Britain. It was a topic for poems and song lyrics, many written expressly for the occasion, such as John Lyly's "Apelles Song" (1584) in which Cupid and Alexander's true love, Camapaspe, play cards for kisses. (Cupid unsuccessfully stakes his mother's doves and sparrows on the game: a clear reference to the medieval association I have already noted.) In addition, exchanging gifts—many times expensive ones—had become the custom on this date in the homes of the wealthy.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, expensive gifts became less the upper-class norm, giving way to the increasingly popular exchange of simpler tokens and letters of love as practiced at lower social class levels. By century's end, printed messages began to replace the handwritten letter, and this mass-produced form boomed with the advent of the penny post in Britain.

Although popular in this mass-mediated form in the nineteenth century in Britain, enthusiasm for Valentine's Day seemed to wane over the years, even as it was embraced in America. In the early 1700s, Americans made relatively fancy valentines by hand for exchange with their loved ones. By the 1800s, the business of making valentines and fancy envelopes had become a profitable sideline for the publishing and printing industry.

Firms such as the George C. Whitney Company encouraged an American expansion of valentine exchange to include good friends as well as lovers. This significantly increased the number of cards sold. Further fueled by the U.S. Postal Service, the American school system (which institutionalized the custom of bringing valentines to school to exchange with teachers and classmates), and the advent of the Hallmark Greeting Card Company in 1910 in Kansas City, the holiday flourished. American cultural expressions of friendship, love, and affection most often took the form of cards and token gifts of flowers and candy. For lovers, perhaps, it was something more daring: champagne or even, in our modern observance, lacy, see-through lingerie.

Throughout the long history of observance in Continental Europe, Great Britain, and America, the core concept around Valentine's Day gift giving has remained pretty much the same. This is, especially for Americans, a day of reciprocity, based on the exchange of tokens and messages of affection and love by both men and women.

—G.H.L.
and decorates its boxes with idealized scenes of Western cities. This symbolic connection of chocolates to the West, then, is likely the key cultural element in the Valentine's Day equation. Women do not give men just any sweet on February 14, only chocolate.

Given their ability to compartmentalize their existence, as Ruth Benedict pointed out in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the Japanese have avoided many potential cultural contradictions by preserving their own customs for traditional holidays and rituals. At the same time, they allow the “mixing” of foreign customs and values with their own in adopted special occasions, as shown in anthropologist Millie Creighton's studies of how cultural boundaries are drawn in retailing foreign ideas in Japan. In this case, chocolate—a Western sweet—can be used during an imported holiday as an individual-to-individual cross-gender gift without necessarily taking on traditional Japanese connotations as a sweet. Men may receive this Western item on this one special day, but they do not have to define it as a traditional *amae mono* (candy), nor do they have to eat it. Indeed, many men who receive chocolates at work bring them home for the female members of their households.

If, on the other hand, the valentine chocolate is given at home to a husband by his spouse, the gift reinforces what psychologist John Connor sees as a culturally approved nurturing role on the part of the wife. Although Japanese women are usually dependent on their husbands for social status and financial support, they are also likely able to seize some degree of power by encouraging their husbands to be dependent on them emotionally and in the domestic sphere of their shared lives—much as the husband, when a child, was dependent on his mother. This culturally expected “mother” role of the Japanese wife is thus reinforced by the giving of chocolate. As she does with her children, a wife defines the domestic arena as one in which she is not dependent and inferior; rather, she is a wielder of emotional power whose gift of chocolate to her husband signifies that, although she is *amae* (dependent) in public, at home *amae* (dependency) is likely to be mutual, if not reversed.

This mix of Western and traditional elements of both public and domestic settings has created a situation in which the meaning of Valentine's Day chocolate is, at the least, culturally ambiguous. In traditional Japanese terms, the purchase and ownership of chocolate help symbolize the dependency of women in this historically gender-stratified society. Yet, at the same time, chocolate is publicly accepted by powerful males, a gift from which they gain status; at the same time, at home it is a symbol of the power of women in the domestic sphere. This ambiguity of meaning is critical to an understanding of how Valentine's Day works, for men and for women, in Japan.
Obligatory chocolate

Although women give men chocolate in other spheres of Japanese life, the place of this ritual in the work world is especially interesting. Japanese firms have historically been arenas of intense gender discrimination, even though there have been some inroads made, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, passed in 1985 under great international pressure. Yet, even with this law, the corporate powerful are almost exclusively male and, as the complaint goes, are more likely to evaluate women subordinates in terms of their charm at serving tea than their suitability for managerial positions. Because of this attitude, as Mary Brinton has documented in her studies of gender stratification in Japan, very few women move up career ladders. Most women in the work world hold positions of amae and subordination and have little hope of significant career advancement, in terms of power or responsibility.

And yet, on February 14, these women collectively shower their male colleagues and bosses with Valentine's Day chocolate that, most say, is an expression of gratitude toward these powerful figures. The difference between a popular and not-so-popular man becomes mercilessly evident on this day in the open office environment of most firms. Some men have their desks heaped with chocolates, while others receive a scant number and, like Charlie Brown, must put a good face on a difficult situation.

The chocolate thus given is known as giri choco (obligatory chocolate) and is, for many Japanese males, a touchy topic of conversation. The sticking point, as Yuko Ogasawara has pointed out in her study of Japanese corporations, is the fact that men, the stronger and more powerful players, treasure these chocolates that women give with very little effort on their part.

'Trivial' chocolate and social power

Given the ambiguous nature of chocolate and its meaning on Valentine's Day, it is not surprising that the holiday, like the significance of its gifts, can be interpreted in different ways, especially in terms of gender. For women, Valentine's Day is generally considered a time of great freedom of personal expression, a special time when they can take on an assertive role in cross-gender relationships. According to Kazuko Fujimoto, an executive with Mary Chocolate, "Valentine's Day is the only occasion or chance when 'being men or women' becomes the focus of attention. Moreover, the leading part is played by women."

The traditional restraint, reserve, and inhibition of self-expression that characterize the Japanese are set aside on this day. It has become one of a very few occasions in Japan that are culturally legitimated as times of personal release for women. In this regard, the fact that Valentine's Day is seen as a Western holiday is
important, as it allows the Japanese to connect this display of womanly assertiveness to what is perceived as an imported Western influence involving ideologies of female liberation and the equality of the sexes, rather than as a phenomenon arising from the traditional gender relations of their own culture.

On this day, women enjoy the power they have over men—especially in the workplace, where obligatory chocolate is given, or not given, depending on how women perceive their treatment throughout the rest of the year. As one woman office worker, interviewed by Ogasawara, said, “Some men treat us like maids... I think a man who didn’t get any chocolate should think why he didn’t. He should reflect on his conduct. It’s good for things to become clear.”

It is amusing to many women that, on this day, powerful men can be made happy simply by giving them something as “trivial” and easily obtained as a box of chocolate. Such power allows a heady mix of free expression on the part of women. They may flip coins and have the loser buy chocolates for the whole group, or give a man a single chocolate out of sympathy that he might not otherwise receive any. They might even use the opportunity to shower a man with chocolates until, in his confusion, he takes the exaggerated attention as a sign of personal affection—at which point, the women may slyly remind him that the gifts were “only” giri choco.

The fact that chocolate can be given to confess love, as well as in the obligatory mode, allows women great deal of power, as the act of giving chocolate is a culturally ambiguous one. No matter what the motive behind the gift—love, respect, mischief, sarcasm, or punishment—the form of the act is the same. A woman need only remind a man that she is merely paying him his due respect to “get away with” whatever the real message behind the gift might be.

Thus women must be discreet and not too obvious when awarding chocolates. A woman who hates her supervisor may well give him a chocolate, in order that she be freed by this gift to openly present chocolates to other men whom she respects or with whom she wants to flirt.
For, in the end, this interaction is effective only to the extent that men value chocolates as gifts. If chocolates were to become defined by men collectively as a threat rather than a reward, the gift might well be symbolically devalued and thus neutralized. If this happened, women would lose their power.

**Men, power, and chocolate**

Given the great social power that men hold in Japanese society, why have they allowed such power to flow to women on February 14? One likely answer is that, no matter the motives of women, the gift of chocolate is flattering and can be interpreted in the culturally approved way as a sign of amae, or love and respect paid by the dependent person.

As well, if proper form is carefully observed by women, especially in the workplace, the practice is not likely to be defined as disruptive to harmonious human relationships but rather as a way for women workers to legitimately signal approval and grievances. As one office supervisor said, “It makes you think about the girls in your office, and you become aware that you must be considerate of them.” In this way, chocolate giving may contribute to the harmonious working of the office and actually reinforce traditional notions of gender inequality.

Hence, as long as women adhere to the proper cultural forms of gift giving on this one day of the year and as long as chocolate itself remains symbolically ambiguous, men will likely anticipate and value their gifts and support the holiday as it has evolved. Viewed in this way, Valentine’s Day could be seen as what anthropologists call a “ritual of reversal.” Such rituals involve the “flipping over” of normally prescribed social and cultural expectations, allowing the powerless to assume power for limited and scheduled-for times and in culturally approved circumstances. Because they serve as outlets for social tensions, such rituals, like Mardi Gras and “Queen for a Day,” may well reinforce existing social arrangements and gender hierarchies rather than pose a serious challenge, as they may appear to do on the surface.

Valentine’s Day seems to fit this definition fairly well. Not only is it limited to one day a year but, because of the cultural compartmentalization abilities of the
Japanese, it can also be celebrated as a “Western” holiday and linked to equally “Western” ideas of gender equality, perhaps without seriously affecting the traditional Japanese way of doing things the other 364 days of the year.

In addition, the Japanese have added “White Day,” celebrated on March 14, to their schedule of holidays. On White Day, men are able to acknowledge the Valentine gifts of women by giving them something in return: lace handkerchiefs, marshmallows, vanilla biscuits, or even white chocolate. Thus, although men do not initiate gifts to women on this day, their ability to reciprocate allows them an opportunity, exactly one month after Valentine’s Day, to balance the slate with women who gave them chocolates on February 14. Yet, is this really balance? Men, although giving White Day gifts, are only passively responding to women’s initiatives; their behavior has been predestined to a large extent. How much power does this really give them?

Of love and chocolate

And so we arrive at the question. Has Valentine’s Day become a ritual of cultural empowerment for Japanese women, one that both nurtures and suggests major changes in power and gender hierarchy in that society? Or are the women behaving at the pleasure of men in a ritual of reversal that siphons off social pressures for gender equality and reinforces traditional gender stratification?

Even allowing for the cultural and temporal compartmentalization of the holiday—a Western-derived, one day a year celebration—which suggests it may be primarily a ritual of reversal, I believe the opposite is more likely true. By taking control of gift giving on that day and, most important, by keeping the meaning of chocolate publicly ambiguous, women have successfully monopolized the means of socially defining chocolate. Men have no way, by themselves, of telling a “good” gift from a “bad” one. Because, without a woman’s help in decoding the gift, men cannot know whether it expresses love, gratitude, ridicule, or even contempt, they must accept chocolate at face value. As long as Japanese men continue to value it and as long as Japanese women can keep its meaning publicly ambiguous, Valentine’s Day chocolate will remain a subtle key to gender empowerment in Japan.

Additional Reading


George H. Lewis is professor of sociology and anthropology at the University of the Pacific. He is currently working on a book on popular cultural connections between America and Pacific Rim countries.