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The Wisdom of the Ordinary: A Prospect for Modern Japan Studies

Universiteit Leiden

The Wisdom of the Ordinary: A Prospect for Modern Japan Studies.

Oratie uitgesproken door

prof.dr. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka

bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van op het gebied van

Modern Japan Studies

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Universiteit Leiden

Mevrouw de vice-Rector Magnificus, Zeer Gewaardeerde Toehoorders,

The most vivid memories of my childhood are not family gatherings at Christmas or skiing holidays in the mountains. Even the cherished trips to the cinema with my beloved grandfather do not stand in my memory very clearly. Although I remember these moments fondly, they have become somewhat blurred, buried beneath the tonnes of data accumulated by my brain over the decades. Among a mass of hazy memories from my Polish childhood during the 1970s, one stands out particularly vibrantly, in full colour, and with all the details still in place. It is the memory of Pewex.

PEWEX stands for 'Przedsiębiorstwo Eksportu Wewnętrznego' (Internal Export Company), a chain of hard-currency shops, which sold otherwise unobtainable western consumer goods in exchange for foreign currency or special coupons issued by the Polish National Bank. Levi's jeans, Colgate toothpaste, Lux soap, Marlboro cigarettes, Johnny Walker whisky, Donald Duck orange juice and Milka chocolate; they were all displayed in these bizarre enclaves of consumerism amid the communist landscape of scarcity.[1]

Since my parents did not have the resources to acquire the hard currency or special coupons required to shop at Pewex, I was occasionally taken there by my aunt and uncle. Their professional connections granted them access to both. As I am sure you can imagine, a trip to Pewex was a real treat! The thrill of being surrounded by seductive displays of consumer goods was, for me, enhanced by the promise of acquiring the cheapest article in the shop - a tiny, transparent box of orange-flavoured Tic-Tacs. The container was smaller than my childish hand and each candy no bigger than my fingertip, but the intensity of flavour released by each and every one of them was unforgettable!

I rarely buy Tic-Tacks these days; tiny transparent boxes neatly stacked at a newspaper stand or beside the cashier in a supermarket seem much less seductive now. Yet, when I occasionally do get them, primarily for the nostalgia's sake, the candy transports me back in time, like the little 'Madelaines' featured in arguably the most famous passage of Marcel Proust's novel, *Remembrance of Things Past.* The taste of the 'Madelaines' triggers a deep emotional reaction in the protagonist, evoked by long-forgotten childhood memories. Proust requires several lengthy paragraphs to describe these emotions, but captures the essential power of taste over memory in the following sentence:

'But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.'[2]

(Take my word for it: it WAS one sentence)

Although I have not been concerned with memory per se in my scholarly work, I have extensively utilised food as a window through which to explore Japan's past. Due to the intricate connections between human nourishment and comfort, food stands central in the life of each individual. Yet owing to its connection with profit and power, food also plays a critical role in the social and economic organisation of societies. What happens to food and eating is, therefore, an important index of change, a privileged basis for the exploration of historical processes. What we eat, how we produce and distribute our food, who prepares it and how we feel about it are never static, but rather in a constant state of flux. Thus, food and eating reflect the sweeping forces of history echoed in everyday, mundane practices.

In my research, I have used food as a means to talk about social change, about colonialism, war, and cultural imperia-

lism. I have approached these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective within the East-Asian context. In my first book, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*[3], I exposed the socio-political circumstances that provided persistent stimulation for dietary change in Japan since the late nineteenth century. Perhaps the most important argument of the book is my claim that Japanese militarism had a homogenising and democratising effect on the Japanese diet, and Japanese colonial expansion was largely responsible for its increasingly multicultural character.

In my second monograph, entitled *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth Century Korea*,[4] I explored the subject of Japanese colonialism further. This time, I was not concerned with the impact of colonialism on the Japanese diet, but rather I looked at how it affected the eating habits of the Korean people. The most surprising result of this study was discovering that the wartime system of state food management, created by the Japanese at the beginning of the 1940s, remained in place long after Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. This colonial legacy set the stage for decades of state control over diet in post-colonial Korea. It was the Korean War (1950-1953), which helped distance the system from any stigma associated with Japanese colonialism. The militarised context of the Cold War was crucial in fortifying colonial practices, which were adapted for the new purpose; the ideological struggle between North and South on the Korean peninsula.

The Legacy of War

In my current project, I employ food yet again as a window of historical inquiry. This time from the perspective of feeding the troops involved in the Asia-Pacific War (1937-1945) and the Korean War. By tracing channels of subsistence for the armed forces, this study aims to identify the relationship between the military and the civilian populations of the region. The point of departure is the premise that war is both an agent of destruction and a catalyst for innovation. These two, at first seemingly contradictory, yet mutually constitutive outcomes of war, are particularly pronounced in the case of Japan.

Japan's defeat in the Pacific War is considered an absolute turning point in the country's modern history. 1945 brought with it the pacifism, democracy, and affluence that characterised Japan to the rest of the world during the 1970s and 80s. It marked the beginning of Japan's strong alliance with the United States, which determined its position in the world system for the remaining half of the century. Defeat also put an end to a decade of Japanese militarism and repression, commonly referred to as *kuroi tanima* ('dark valley'). While it is indisputable that 1945 is a turning point in the history of modern Japan, we should not overlook how the accomplishments of post-war Japan are deeply rooted in the pre-war period and in the 'dark valley' of wartime. As John Dower argues in his influential essay "The Useful War", the militaristic era was a period of immense complexity and diversity that greatly influenced the nature and dynamics of post-war Japanese society.[5]

The structural legacies of wartime Japan to the post-surrender decades are particularly evident in relation to technology. The mobilisation for total war since the late 1930s stimulated a second industrial revolution in Japan, and spurred an unprecedented growth in human capital. For example, the labour force in manufacturing and construction increased from 5.8 million in 1930 to 9.5 million in 1944; in just one decade, between 1935 and 1945, the number of technical schools increased from eleven to four hundred.[6] Science students, exempt from conscription until the very closing stages of the Pacific War, saw a spectacular rise in their number: from less than fifteen thousand in 1940 to over thirty one thousand five years later.[7]

As economic historians have documented, Japanese wartime technology was diverse and sophisticated in ways that facilitated a swift conversion to peacetime activity. Factories that made machine guns converted to making sewing machines; optical weapons factories began producing cameras and binoculars. Nikon, for example, the primary producer of optical munitions for the Imperial Japanese Navy, had by September 1945 selected thirty-eight designs for post-surrender production. Seven out of the eleven major car producers in post-war

Japan shifted to cars from the manufacture of aircraft, tanks and warships.[8] As Tessa Morris-Suzuki shrewdly argues 'the developments of the war years had one profoundly paradoxical consequence: the unsuccessful attempt to win the "war of science and technology" left Japanese institutions, human skills and public attitudes remarkably well prepared for the massive import of western technology in the years which followed the surrender to the Allied powers in 1945'.[9]

While the occupying US forces were at first the primary market for new consumer products manufactured by the former wartime industries, the 1950s and 60s saw high-tech commodities make their way into ordinary Japanese households. In particular, electrical appliances for the home evolved into objects of mass consumption. Although very expensive by income standards of the time, sales were stimulated by a new rhetoric of 'rationalization' of daily life and by the symbolism of the newly coined concept of *akarui seikatsu* ('bright life'). Electrical appliances were turned into symbols of good living and hope for a better future.[10] From the mid-1950s onward, the term *sanshu no jingi* ('the imperial regalia'), became widely used in reference to the most desired electrical appliances: a black and white television, a refrigerator and a washing machine.[11] In just five years, between 1955 and 1960, the proliferation of washing machines in Japanese households increased from 4 to 45 per cent. By 1963, 90 per cent of all Japanese families had television sets. During the 1970s people became preoccupied with acquiring a renewed set of talismanic possessions: a colour television, an air-conditioner, and a car. Cars would become Japan's most profitable export commodity. However in the early stages, the domestic market was crucial to secure the industry's growth and 1966 heralded a new era of personal car ownership in Japan. Owing to the development of cost-effective production processes the price of a new *kei jidôsha*, a small economy car, dropped that year to the equivalent of the average per capita annual income, instantly becoming a realistic aspiration for every Japanese family.[12] The domestic car market rapidly expanded in the following years due to the rising standard of living, while tariff barriers for imported cars were kept high. These circumstances spurred the global domination of the Japanese automobile industry. By the 1980s, Japanese car manufacturers were gaining a major foothold in the US and European markets, and by the end of the twentieth century Japan had become the largest car producing country in the world.[13]

From Techno-Nationalism to Consumption

As this short overview reveals, it was the production *and* consumption of advanced technological commodities that were at the crux of Japan's post-war economic growth. Industrial technology also figured prominently in the construction of the post-war Japanese identity. During the 1950s technology was merely a symbol, an icon of an affluent future, which a decade later became a fixed component of everyday life, and a source of national pride. The launch of the *Shinkansen* high speed railway at the opening of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 marked the beginning of a powerful association between technology and the Japanese national identity, a phenomenon which became known as 'Japanese techno-nationalism'.

'Techno-Nationalism' was a term coined by Richard Reich to describe America's fear of losing control over technology vital to its military industry and other projects of strategic national importance.[14] Economic analysts and political scientists have approached Japanese 'techno-nationalism' from the same perspective; linking the Japanese drive to achieve technological self-sufficiency with the need for national security.[15] More recently, scholars more concerned with the social and cultural developments in post-war Japan have emphasised a different aspect of Japanese techno-nationalism: an identification with high-tech commodities as being essential to 'Japaneseness'; indicating a sense of new 'national cultural identity'.[16] It has been pointed out that commercial advertising was influential in connecting consumer technology to popular consciousness. For example, in the early 1960s, at a time when Japanese consumer electronics had not yet achieved global prominence, Sony promoted its portable television with the slogan: *Nippon no hokori ga mata hitotsu!* ('One more reason for Japan to be proud!').[17]

The growing universal appreciation of Japanese consumer technologies since the 1980s has evoked further sentiments of cultural nationalism, including the 'self-Orientalising' emphasis on Japanese cultural characteristics as being responsible for the country's technological excellence. In particular, adaptable ingenuity as a long-standing, unchanging feature of Japanese culture was highlighted in the genre of *nihonjinron*, essays about the singular uniqueness of the Japanese, their culture and society.[18] The image of Japan as 'a unique case', an exotic society governed by centuries-old rules and traditions still prevails, even in academic circles, despite the fact that the Japanese 'miracle' no longer commands global attention, and the cultural myths proliferated during the heyday of Japan's global economic success have been demystified. The image of Japanese quirkiness is eagerly perpetuated by the mass media, for which the drama of exoticism constitutes a key selling point. Yet, Japan scholars both in and outside Japan have contributed in many ways to the persistent representation of Japan as an 'exotic Other'. As my predecessor Chris Goto-Jones explained in his own inaugural lecture four years ago, it is the Orientalist legacy - our own fantasies of difference - which constitute the very foundation of Japan Studies. It is western academe itself, prof. Goto-Jones argued, which has actually created the Orient (read 'Japan') as 'a site of fantastical self-indulgence, which doesn't really exist'.[19]

I am not alone among a more critical group of Japan scholars who believe it is absolutely necessary to strive to distance Japan Studies from the Orientalist tradition by mainstreaming Japan within existing academic disciplines. In fact, I have prepared a plan on how this goal can be achieved, and intend to work on it until my retirement, which, according to my calculations, will take place in January 2034. The starting point for my plan and the main argument of my lecture today, is that focusing on mundane aspects of everyday life can offer an opportunity for Modern Japan Studies to become a mainstream site for scholarly investigation, and a source of theoretical knowledge. Exploring daily routines, centred on human interaction with material objects in Japan, can be used to counter balance the Eurocentric approach to material culture. This will provide an opportunity to cast western theory in an entirely new light, challenging its assumptions and preoccupations, and its claim to universality.[20]

Consumption, with its sets of practices and the associated ideology of consumerism, is irrefutably a central experience in the lives of people around the world. Material welfare, represented by the consumption of goods and services, has for the last half a century served to legitimise capitalism in the eyes of millions of ordinary people. In fact, as Alex Callinicos argues in *The Revenge of History*, the inability of Eastern European regimes to create a viable consumer society lies at the very root of their collapse.[21]

As a mature and highly complex consumer society, Japan has the potential to serve not merely as a test case for the existing theories, but to become a source of the theory itself. A recently published ethnography of Japanese home interiors, conducted by Inge Daniels, is a prime example of this potential. Her study has been recognised as an important model for analysing domestic space.[22]

Through its abundant use of material objects, Japan provides a rich laboratory to explore the connection between people and things; as well as the interactions between people that take place through objects. The case of 'techno-nationalism', which I described earlier, is the tip of the evidential iceberg indicating the importance of material forms in the construction of collective and individual identities, in Japan and beyond. As Daniel Miller shrewdly observed, material culture is 'a surprisingly illusive component of modern culture, which, although apparently highly conspicuous, has consistently managed to evade the focus of academic gaze, and remains the least understood of all central phenomena of the modern age'.[23]

In his inaugural lecture in Leiden earlier this year, Pieter ter Keurs, the newly appointed Extraordinary Professor in the field of Anthropology of Material Culture, reminded us that the foundation for our distain towards material objects constitutes an important legacy of the Enlightenment. In his prominent

dictum *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) defined thinking as central to the human existence, divorcing the thinking man from the material world.[24] Since these times material objects have been regarded as trivial and inconsequential to human life and have been largely marginalised in scientific and philosophical discourses.[25] Even anthropology, which began with a strong focus on material artefacts had, by the 1920s, given preference to a new methodology of participant observation; material culture as an intellectual tool fell by the wayside.[26]

This disparaging attitude towards material culture began to change three decades ago. Studies of material objects and human interaction with the artefactual world have experienced a true renaissance, revealing how seemingly trivial and common place objects perform an active role in social and cultural processes. As scholars have convincingly demonstrated, the material world is not merely a context of our lives, but in many ways, and on many levels, it affects our inner selves. First of all, objects have an impact on our physical comfort and, by extension, our state of mind. It seems redundant to explain the distress, both physical and emotional, of an ill-fitting shoe, a crowded bus, or a dysfunctional computer. Neither is it necessary to spell out the contrast evoked by a comfortable chair, a delicious meal or a cuddly scarf in the middle of winter. Yet, our interaction with things is far more meaningful than the embodiment of their materiality alone. By affecting our daily routines, objects profoundly influence our attitudes and assumptions. The most obvious example of this is the impact of technological innovations, such as the airplane, the telephone and the Internet have had on our perceptions of time and space. Consumer goods are also actively used in social and individual self-creation, they are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and others. Think of choices like following the latest fashion, or intentionally not following it; think of subcultures and their totemic attributes; think of the transformation women underwent between shedding the corset, in the early twentieth century, and slipping into jeans half a century later.

The Power of Objects

In Japan, and elsewhere, people-artefact interaction is considered of secondary importance to the processes of culture. Yet, upon closer examination, it appears that cultural change is often facilitated through commodities. A powerful example to illustrate this process is the transformation of 'cuteness' into an omnipresent daily aesthetics and mainstream cultural feature of contemporary Japan. During the last two decades, the sugar-coated, comic-book atmosphere communicated by cuteness has become pervasive in Japan, colonising even such sober institutions as the police and Self Defence Forces.

Cute (*kawaii*) was originally the domain of children and young girls. Objects classified as *kawaii* initially included small animals, cartoon characters and fluffy toys, which evoke warm feelings of affection and the impulse to cuddle. It was during the first half of the 1980s that cuteness became visible as the dominant characteristic of Japanese popular culture; from music to advertising and fashion. This phenomenon is considered to have been brought about by two concurrent developments. On the one hand, the popularity of a burgeoning range of cute products was accompanied by the entry of unmarried women into consumer market. The demand for female office workers in the thriving Japanese economy provided young single women with a disposable income and a freedom to spend it as they wished. On the other hand, some scholars suggest that young adults, seeking greater personal freedom, have adopted 'cute culture' as a form of stubborn resistance towards the constraints of adult society.[27]

By the 1990s, when the women infatuated with the cute style of the previous decade started their own families, the range of *kawaii* objects expanded into the influential realm of the homemaker to include kitchenware, electrical appliances, pillow cases, bath towels, and daily necessities, such as toiletries and food.[28] Moreover, the association with the use and exchange of cute objects began to shift from infantilism and girlish femininity towards being cheerful and 'young at heart'; attributes that acquired an increasingly positive connotation.

This was an important step in the embracing of *kawaii* by men and corporate players, such as banks and telephone companies. Following the example of Tokyo Metropolitan Police, which in 1987 created its own cute mascot Pipo (short for 'people's police'), local police corps all over Japan now boast their own mascots strategically deployed to soften their authoritarian image. In 2008, the Justice Ministry encouraged local prosecutors to create their own mascots (so-called 'soft characters', *yurukyara*) to promote the lay-judge system to be introduced in Japan the following year.[29]

Perhaps the most extreme example of the proliferation of the concept of *kawaii* in contemporary Japanese society is the phenomenon described by Sabine Frühstück in her ethnography on the Self Defence Forces. She argues that through the extensive use of cuteness, from the 1990s onward, the Self Defence Forces strove to manipulate and align themselves with popular culture, seeking to redefine and actively claim their place in Japanese society. These strategies have, according to Frühstück, 'symbolically "disarmed" the SDF; normalized and domesticated the military to look like other (formerly) state-run organizations such as the railway and postal systems'.[30]

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the successively expanding influence of cute objects reached global dimensions. Widespread distribution and consumption of Japanese cute goods to other parts of the world - a phenomenon that Christine Yano labels 'pink globalization' - has profoundly changed the image of Japan.[31] Even the Japanese government has chosen to capitalise on cuteness as a new, youth-oriented way to brand Japan, relinquishing the dark-suited businessmen at work for a newer, overtly playful, feminised iconography of kitsch.

The main attraction behind the globalisation of *kawaii* culture is its paradoxical empowerment.[32] *Kawaii* has come to signify rebellion against the alienation of 'civilisational perfection', it promises freedom from the coldness and automation of a techno-future.[33] Another appeal of *kawaii* is its surreal nature. Unrelated to any cultural, ethnic or national tradition it is a space that is both foreign and familiar, an imagined community of fantasy that happens to be invented in Japan.

The epitome of the new global Japan is Hello Kitty, a white mouthless kitten, which now rivals Mickey Mouse as the most recognised contemporary cartoon character. Since its launch in 1974, Hello Kitty has grown into the best-selling asset of the Sanrio Corporation, which designs and manufactures a vast range of cute products. But the little kitten is the only one that has turned into a lifestyle brand, a global logo that is omnipresent and can potentially infuse the entire material world, from clothing, cosmetics and jewelry, to computers, mobile phones, cars, guns and condoms.[34]

Now that she colonises shopping malls all over the world, Hello Kitty has found a new home in museums. September this year saw Leiden's Japan Museum SieboldHuis follow the global trend by organising an exhibition and series of activities dedicated to Hello Kitty. Just a few minutes' walk from this lecture hall, the museum is located in the building where, in 1832, the now famous ethnographic collection of Philipp Franz Von Siebold (1796-1866) opened to the public. A set of over 5000 artefacts gathered by Von Siebold in Japan between 1823 and 1829 is the largest collection of its kind in the world. It sits at the heart of the National Museum of Ethnology, which ranks as one of oldest ethnographic museums in Europe.[35]

Eyewitness accounts reveal that Von Siebold succeeded through the use of the objects he collected to replicate an image of Japan in minute detail. One visitor, in 1835, described the experience created by the exhibition in the following words:

'I found out how lifelike one is put in a strange country, through such an ethnographical collection, in which nothing which does not belong there has been left out, when I entered the street and believed myself to be wandering through one of the alleys of Tokyo; such was my lively fantasy, moved by what I had seen.'[36]

I could not wish for a better symbolic note on which to end this lecture. We have come full circle, from 1832 to 2011. Material objects have, from the very beginning, been essential to the process of accumulating knowledge about Japan in Leiden. An exhibition of Hello Kitty merchandise is as essential to understanding of contemporary Japan as Von Siebold's collection was at the time of its opening. A substantial difference between now and then is that the global circulation of Japanese consumer goods, including Hello Kitty and video games, has made Japan less exotic and more real.

Creation of meaning through the consumption of commodities in post-industrial societies is too complex to fall neatly into cultural stereotypes and academic categories. Herein lies the strength and wisdom of the everyday and the ordinary, and the challenges of mainstreaming of Modern Japan Studies across the curriculum.

Following in the Leiden tradition, I will conclude my lecture with some words of gratitude. This task proved a challenge, since I have benefited in one way or another from nearly everyone in this room. In choosing how to direct my words of thanks I have decided to follow the maxim 'less is more'. To be honest, I have never really believed that less is indeed more, but this strategy will lead us safely to the reception room within the next few minutes.

First of all, I would like to thank the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (NWO) who has supported my work for nearly a decade. Without NWO grants - Veni, Vidi and Aspasia - not only would I not be standing here today, but, most probably, I would have been compelled to leave the academia altogether.

I would also like to thank the students and staff of the Japan Studies programmes, who make up my everyday working environment. I have become involved in teaching and university administration relatively late in my career, following lonely years of research. I am now convinced that building together an academic community - in the genuine sense of the word - is far more important than the long list of tasks specified in our contracts.

And finally, some personal words of thanks.

To prof. Robertson, dear Jennifer! You expressed interest in my work from the very moment we met, nearly twenty years ago, and you have never let me down. I would be nowhere without your friendship and encouragement, and, above all, without your constructive criticism.

To prof. Goto-Jones, dear Chris! One's first boss is like one's first love, no-one will ever compare! You have not only given me continuous support, but have also helped me discover a side of myself that I had no idea existed.

To dr. Daniels, dear Inge! You will always be my great *senpai* of course, and I have great hopes for what we can do together, between here and Oxford.

And finally, the last person I would like to mention is prof. Jolanta Tubielewicz (1931-2003), who I can best describe as my 'academic mother'. She sadly passed away eight years ago. I met her for the first time in 1987 at the Japanese history seminar at Warsaw University, and later worked on my Master's thesis under her supervision. Prof. Tubielewicz was a graceful woman, a generous yet demanding teacher, an industrious author, and a dean of the Faculty of Modern Languages.

A spectacular role model from quarter of a century ago. We need them *here* too, *now*.

Ik heb gezegd.

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Prof.dr. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka was appointed Professor of Modern Japan Studies at Leiden University in February 2011. She has an MA degree in Japanese Studies from Warsaw University, Poland (1990) and an MA degree in Area Studies from Tsukuba University, Japan (1994). Cwiertka moved to the Netherlands in 1994 and began work on her PhD thesis entitled *The Making of Modern Culinary Tradition in Japan*. She successfully defended her thesis at Leiden University in January 1999 and continued her research, using food as a window into the modern history of Japan and Korea. In 2003, the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO) awarded her the prestigious VENI grant, followed by the VIDI grant in 2007.

Cwiertka is the author of *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (Reaktion Books 2006) and *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth Century Korea* (Reaktion Books, forthcoming in 2012). She has also edited several volumes with a larger geographical focus, including *Asian Food: The Global and the Local* (University of Hawai'i Press 2002), *Food and War in East Asia* (Ashgate, forthcoming), and *Critical Readings on Food in East Asia* (Brill, forthcoming).

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