A Perfect Prelude: The Cultural Significance of Wagashi

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Abstract

The term wagashi refers to a traditional Japanese confectionary often connected with Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony. In a formal tea gathering it is served about half-an-hour before the tea is offered and its function is to prepare one's pallet for the slightly bitter taste of matcha, served in the form of thick tea, koicha, where powdered tea is blended by a bamboo whisk with a small amount of hot water. This tea, shared between a small number of guests, is the pinnacle of a chaji – a formal tea gathering, which includes serving of a kaiseki meal, the laying of two fires and the serving of two different kinds of tea preceded by two different types of okashi. This paper will focus on the history and cultural significance of wagashi in the context of Chanoyu, their seasonal poetic names and the art, practice and business of okashi making. Wagashi are not so much about taste as they are works of art. Meant to be consumed shortly after being made, they possess both historical and cultural significance that goes beyond their taste. Not a dessert at the end of a meal but rather a prelude to another experience, wagashi are a cultural universe in the form of edible sculptures. They are part of a tradition carefully passed from generation to generation, which is still very much alive in Japan today.

Keywords: aesthetics, culture, chanoyu, mindfulness, contemplation, intercultural studies, washoku, wagashi, culinary studies

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Introduction

The term Wagashi ("wa" – Japanese, "kashi" – confectionary) is used along with other terms starting with Wa (Wafuku, Washitsu, Washi, Wamono etc.) to distinguish Japanese origin of the following object. It is almost impossible to adequately translate the term okashi. "Confectionery" usually refers to sweet foods like candy, pastries, chocolate, and the stores that one can buy them at. Flour confectionery refers to pastry, chocolate confectionery – to chocolate, milk confectionery – to sweets made from cream, or condensed milk, while sugar confectionary refers to candies. Therefore, neither "confectionary" nor "sweets" are the accurate terms. In a word "Okashi" "Ka" stands for "fruit" and "Shi" for "child". There is no indication of sweetness or sugar used. It seems that the best way could simply be to leave the term as is and use it without translation.

Today, Wagashi is an umbrella term for a great variety of "sweets" with many regional variations with the emphasis on the Japanese origin of the product. In this paper, I will be using the term okashi referring to the okashi used in Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony. While Western sweets most often have descriptive names that are helping to select the desired kind of taste and texture (strawberry shortcake, apple pie, chocolate ice-cream), wagashi often have a name rather than a simple ingredients focused description – matsukaze (wind in the pines), raindrop mochi, yatsuhashi (eight bridges) etc. While Okashi are part of the culinary culture, they go beyond just taste as complex as it might be. They carry an important cultural significance and are part of a long-standing unbroken tradition. By learning about okashi we are able to explore many important aspects of Japanese culture.

The Art of Five Senses

The first okashi-like foods were eaten in Jomon period (10,000 BC–300 BC). They were made from chestnut "flour" or ground chestnuts with the addition of eggs and other ingredients and were later baked. Yayoi period (300 BC–300 AD) brought rice production to Japan and together with it dango dumplings made of rice flour gained popularity. Rice flour was also used to make mochi – okashi still widely used today. On the 16th day of the 6th month in 848 (Heian period) Emperor Ninmyō made an offering of sixteen okashi called Kashogashi to the Kami at Ise Shrine during the main yearly ritual in prayer for the health and prosperity of the nation and healing from the plague. Later one was added to six to form seven, then seven okashi were traditionally offered before higher procedures in Chanoyu. Later June 16th became a national okashi day. Sugar has been initially brought to Japan in Nara period (710–795) and was both rare and expensive, so it was mainly used in medicine. Later, in Heian period, custom of exchange of sugar-based okashi became common among aristocrats. Its culinary use expanded significantly after the arrival of the first Europeans in Japan. They brought sugar and knowledge of how to produce it, but it wasn't until late 1800s that sugar became widely available and cost-effective.

Most okashi we know today were created in Edo period (1603–1868) and got their development during Meiji.

Suzuki Sōken calls okashi "the art of five senses" (Suzuki, 2025). First, guests see okashi with their eyes. Just like with a work of art, they appreciate the shape, the colour and colour combinations, details, and general form. These days, there are exhibitions of okashi where the displayed namagashi are so intricate and complex that it seems they have long departed from the idea of simplicity that Chanoyu promotes, and the very purpose of being a prelude rather

than the main. Hearing refers to texture and the sound some elements can cause when the guests are eating okashi. They are normally cut with a small metal cutter kept in a stack of papers each guest would have on them. They are cut in approximately three pieces; each cut may reveal the design inside. While fragrance seldom encouraged as an element of okashi, if such element as yuzu citron or dried persimmon are used, inevitably guests notice and enjoy the seasonal smell.

Texture of okashi is being examined also once the pieces are in the mouth. In Japanese there are two different words to describe texture appreciation in food. “Hazawari” refers to how it feels on one’s teeth while “shitazawari” – to the way it feels on one’s tongue. The same area of the tongue is responsible for both bitter and sweet taste. So, it is the same area of the tongue that would be “responsible” for the perception of the taste of okashi and of the taste of tea. The taste of okashi is supposed to prepare the palette for the taste of tea. Therefore, it is supposed to be soft, not overpowering in any way, leading the way to a bowl of tea. Omogashi are usually served either on the small individual plates, or in stacked lacquer boxes called fuchidaka, or in larger bowls for a more informal occasion.

Higashi (or “dried kashi”) are offered before the thin tea, called “usucha”. Usually, two kinds are placed on a tray as guests may have more than one bowl of thin tea. When selecting higashi, the host will consider the combination of the two kinds, thinking of the textures and images. They both may even become the two elements of a composition, such as a waterfall and green maple leaves for summer.

Okashi in Chanoyu

Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony, is an interdisciplinary complex, a synthesis of traditional Japanese and world arts and crafts combined with multiple cultural elements and brought together in a creative ritual of preparing, making and sharing a bowl of tea. Rand Castile writes that tea in Japan is such a special beverage that drinking it became “a way of life” (Castile, 1971). Chanoyu includes architecture, garden design, incense, ceramics, lacquer, woodwork, bamboo craft, textiles, metal work, paper, calligraphy, culinary arts, and okashi. Students of tea would learn various procedures specific to use of an object or a season or both.

At the heart of tea practice lies the form to which all the elements lead and to which they connect. This form is called chaji or a formal tea gathering that would consist of two different teas, two fire ceremonies, and an hour-long kaiseki meal. Sanmi Sasaki categorizes seven basic forms of chaji and mentions fifteen other variations (Sasaki, 1996). Chaji is focused on offering the guests a bowl of thick tea, and everything else is done to prepare guests’ palette and mind for this experience of partaking a bowl of tea. The purpose of okashi is to prepare the palette for a, some may say, slightly bitter taste of matcha. According to Sanmi Sasaki, “the flavour (of tea) is intoxicating, inescapable, memorable” (Sasaki, 2005). Okashi are paving the way to this experience as they are always connected to koicha thick tea shared by the guests from the same bowl, and not to the kaiseki meal. I argue that they should not be considered a dessert but be taken as a separate experience directly connected with the following in about half an hour bowl of tea. In colder season okashi follow the kaiseki meal but not because they are connected to the meal itself. The first thing the host does is warm the room by laying the charcoal in a certain precise way so it will boil/warm the water by the certain time. Then kaiseki meal is served and okashi are offered. In warmer season, kaiseki meal is served first, followed by the charcoal laying and then okashi are offered. After okashi have been eaten guests are going back to the garden to have a short break. When they return to the tearoom, the host makes (kneads,

actually) a bowl of thick tea that will be shared by all the guests. Their palette is well prepared as the taste of okashi still lingers in their mouths.

In Chanoyu, there are two main kinds of okashi – omogashi (main okashi) or namagashi (freshly made okashi) and higashi – so called "dried kashi". Omogashi are made or bought the day of the tea as they do las more than a day or two. They are about the size of an egg and are usually made from either red or white beans paste, called an. An can be smooth (koshi-an) or still with larger particles (tsubu-an). Beans are soaked, cooked, squeezed by hand to extract the flesh, and cooked further with sugar. They will later be sculpted to the desired shapes. There are other kinds of an, such as chestnut an, or cooked egg yolk an, as well as some cooked vegetables variations. Other kinds of omogashi include mochi, nerikiri, kanten, kuzu, domyojiko etc.

Omogashi always represent a seasonal image and always have a seasonal name. For example, at the end of November, when we are about to welcome winter, poetic names will reflect snow, ice, cold and warmth of the indoors, while in July we will use the names and images of water, rain, wind, something that brings a cool feeling. It isn't just the name that will reflect seasonality. In summer "clear", "see-through" textures are favoured while steamed or warm okashi will be naturally used in winter.

Poetry of Okashi

What keeps okashi apart from the Western confectionary is certainly the fact that especially when used for tea they would have a poetic name which will greatly contribute to the overall narrative of a tea gathering. The names are always seasonal, and they will always be shared with the guests once the tea is tasted. These names reflect anticipation of the approaching season or micro season. While seasons are observed in many cultures, in Japan, the study of the seasons became a special field. According to Sasaki Sanmi, "kisetsukan" or feeling of the season is at the core of Chanoyu (Sasaki, 2005), and nowhere it reflects more than in seasonal poetic names of okashi. For example, Harugasumi or Spring Mist refers to the delicate hazy atmosphere of spring, while Mizubotan – Peony in Water, made of see-through kuzu arrowroot, is used in early or mid-summer to offer an image of water and a cool feeling during the hot time of the year. Ginga or Silver River is connected to the Milky Way and is used during the Tanabata celebration in early July. Okuribi or the lights to see someone off will be used during O Bon festival when the souls of the departed are believed to return to the family homes and then go back to where they came from; to illuminate their way, hundreds of bonfires in the shape of various characters are lit on the slopes of the mountains to help the souls of the departed to return. Tsuki-no Kage or Moon Glow is used in September when the moon is most beautiful. It draws on poetic anthology of Hyakuninisshū, poem number seventy-nine about the clear and pure moonlight. Hatsumomiji or the First Red Leaves will be used in late October when the leaves are turning colour, while Kogarashi written with a character for tree and a character for "wither", "dry up" will be used later in November as it refers to a cold wind bringing down the las leaves on the trees. A very auspicious okashi- hishi hanabira mochi – are used for the first tea of the year and made of a brightly coloured red/pink miso an and a piece of candied burdock wrapped in a thin circle of mochi showing the pink and symbolizing the inner dignity.

Conclusions

Wagashi are an important part of Japanese cultural fabric and a centuries-long rich tradition from which we can learn about the evolution of taste and the sense of beauty of the Japanese. While many cultural elements in Japan have their roots in China and Korea, the way Japanese accepted, modified, and transformed them is unique, and it made these elements truly Japanese. Chanoyu takes okashi to a different level of cultural existence by providing it a prominent place within the cultural complex. Wagashi are not only part of culinary studies but are an important part of the cultural context as they are closely connected with other elements of Chanoyu and beyond. Unlike Western confectionary, wagashi are closely connected with literature, poetry in particular, as they always have seasonal poetic names. They can teach us how to live a healthier and happier life and move towards a more balanced, aesthetically beautiful and mindful way of preparing, serving and partaking the food and enjoy every moment bringing beauty and mindfulness into seemingly mundane corners of every day. Mara Miller writes: “The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese… than the truths they expose about the human condition…” (Miller, 2011).

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