

## Cute Food, Communication & Connection

**Lesson Plan:** Cute Food, Communication & Connection

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### Target Audience:

High School students, Undergraduate students

### Duration:

2 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

### Potential Courses to Include this Lesson In:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses
- Media Studies courses

## **Background:**

In this lesson, students explore the ways in which cute food in Japan functions as a form of multi-sensory communication, connection, and imaginative world-making. By collectively analyzing a video interview with food and accessory designer Tadaaki Wakamatsu of Q-POT, students explore how cute food provides a whimsical, pro-social mode of connection and how this intersects with commodity-fetishism and performative identities. For the video interview, we have created short, 12-13 minute versions as well as 25-35 minute versions, so that educators may incorporate them into different length classes as appropriate.

## **Learning Objectives:**

1. To understand the role that cuteness plays in the creation, consumption, and marketing of food in Japan and beyond.
2. To explore how imaginative creation and world-making through food works as a form of visual communication.
3. To reflect on the social dimension of cute food in building relationships, social ties, and connections.

## **Assigned Materials:**

de Vries, Nadia. "Under the Yolk of Consumption: Re-envisioning the Cute as Consumable." In *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, edited by Joshua Paul Dale et al., pp. 263–283. London: Routledge, 2017.

Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik, and Alice Julier, pp. 13–20. London: Routledge, 2018.

"Cute Food: Exploring *Kawaii* Food in Harajuku (Extended Version)," Global Kawaii Association, 2024.

"Cute Food: Exploring *Kawaii* Food in Harajuku (Short Version)," Global

Kawaii Association, 2024.

### **Optional Assigned Materials:**

Cramer, Janet M., Carlita P, Greene, and Lynn Walters. *Food as Communication: Communication as Food*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011.

hooks, bell. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, pp. 21–39. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

Occhi, Debra J. "Consuming *Kyara* 'Characters': Anthropomorphization and Marketing in Contemporary Japan." *Hikakubunka* 15 (2010): pp. 78–87.

Occhi, Debra J. "*Kyaraben* (Character Bento): The Cutesification of Japanese Food in and Beyond the Lunchbox." *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (2016): pp. 63–77.

Rath, Eric C. and Stephanie Assman. *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

### **Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:**

1. Design your own cute food! In groups, students work together to create their own creative dessert, playing close attention to how it might become cute and communicative. Students can either draw with markers on butcher's paper, or real or toy ingredients could be brought in for a multisensory experience. At the end of the activity, students need to pitch their creation to the class. Some prompts could include:
  1. What colors, shapes, and textures does the food have?
  2. What motifs (such as faces, characters, or symbols) could be used?
  3. How does it smell and taste?
  4. How is the food meant to be eaten and shared?
  5. What is the best way to photograph the food to share with others?
2. Using the video "Cute Food: Exploring *Kawaii* Food in Harajuku,"

students listen to an interview with Tadaaki Wakamatsu about his design practice and thoughts on cute food as communication. Students may wish to review his website materials to familiarize themselves with his work. The following questions can be used to reflect on his insights:

1. How does Wakamatsu envision cute food as a form of imaginative and positive world-making?
2. In what ways does cute food work as a mode of communication and connection for Wakamatsu? What motivated him to explore this aspect of cute food?
3. What symbolism, narratives, and performative qualities does whipped cream have for Wakamatsu?
4. What role does cute food photography play for Wakamatsu? What role does sharing these images on social media play for connection?
5. According to Wakamatsu, what are the overlaps between "*shōjo* manga" (comics for girls) and the popularity of cute food?
6. What role does cute food motifs play in Wakamatsu's practice of turning "negative into positive"?
3. Reflecting on activities one and two, to what extent have the cute foods created and discussed "open[ed] up a world of make-believe" through whimsy and comfort as discussed in de Vries (pp. 254, 266–67)? To what extent does it also reflect commodity fetishism?
4. In what ways does the cute food in activities one and two reflect a system of communication, images, uses, and situations as Barthes outlines in his essay?
5. Barthes (p. 14) observes that food "sums up and transmits a situation; but constitutes an information; it signifies." He also observes that what is true for clothing as a communication of self and social place, is also true of food. In what ways is this reflected in Wakamatsu's conceptualization of cute food as communication, to be both eaten and realized through design as a form of wearable accessory?

## **Evaluation:**

Students research a cute food trend on social media (Instagram, YouTube or TikTok) and analyze the ways in which it operates as a form of visual communication and social connection between participants both eating the food or engaging with these online images.

## **Instructor Reference Materials:**

Wakamatsu Tadaaki, Official Website:

<https://wakamatsutadaaki.com/>

Q-POT, Official Website:

<https://intl.q-pot.jp/>

Daniel M.N. Turner and Audrey Carlsen. "In Japan, Food Can Be Almost Too Cute To Eat." *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 29, 2013.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/02/04/170583365/in-japan-food-can-be-almost-too-cute-to-eat>

Joshua Paul Dale. "The ultimate act of love? The truth behind Japan's charaben culture." *CNN Travel*, March 14, 2017.

<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/japan-food-snap-power-of-cute-oped/index.html>