

The Nature of *Wagashi* and Mental Health

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Abstract

Japanese confectionery sweets, known as *wagashi*, are a unique and widely acknowledged aspect of Japanese culture and history. But does *wagashi* also have a role in mental health? Due to the aesthetic relations between *wagashi* and aspects of nature, in this paper I consider previously-researched connections between nature and mental health/cognitive function to conclude that *wagashi* has the potential to elicit positive benefits on mental health. In doing so, I provide brief overviews on the history and cultural standing of *wagashi* as well as the state of mental health in Japan according to data compiled by the World Health Organization. Further research and experimentation, however, is needed to confirm the true effects of *wagashi* on mental health and evaluate the potential of success as a form of addressing mental health issues within modern Japanese society.

Keywords: *wagashi*, mental health, nature

Introduction

With one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world, Japan is often looked at as a model for healthy living. However, in recent times, mental health has come to be a topic of national concern. Are there certain aspects of culture that relate to mental health? In this paper, I seek to consider the potential connections and benefits of *wagashi* (traditional Japanese sweets) to mental health in the context of Japanese culture and society. To do so, I explain *wagashi* and its role in Japan, define mental health and overview mental health in Japan, and connect *wagashi* to research findings on the relations between nature and mental health.

What is *Wagashi*?

Wagashi (和菓子) refers generally to traditional Japanese confectionary sweets. *Kashi* (菓子) linguistically refers to nuts or fruits, and that is where the concept of *wagashi* is said to have begun as, although what we think of as *wagashi* today likely stems from *mochi* and *dango*, which were made around the Jomon and Yayoi periods when people made portable snacks by rolling balls out of roasted grains (Keiko, 2001). However, as different products were imported from different countries, the idea of “sweets” and *wagashi* was eventually transformed.

There are many different kinds and forms of *wagashi*, ranging in shape, form, and flavor. Different categories of *wagashi* stem from different origins. *Togashi* and *tenshin* come from China, while *namban-gashi* was born from Portuguese and Spanish influence (Keiko, 2001). Popular types of *wagashi* today include *mochi*, *dango*, *dorayaki*, *manju*, *yokan*, and *sembei* (Keiko, 2001). *Wagashi* are typically separated into three categories based on water content: *namagashi* (fresh-made sweets with the most moisture), *ban-namagashi* (semi-fresh sweets), and *higashi* (dry sweets) (Keiko 2001).

Wagashi has come to become a special aspect of Japanese culture, separate from everyday snacks (*okashi*/お菓子). According to Morisaki and Suda, *wagashi* stand out in the fact that “have a unique cultural dimension to the extent that they are integrated into unique Japanese social customs including religious beliefs, hospitality, and the culture of everyday life” (Morisaki and Suda, 2016, p. 6). *Wagashi* is also “traditionally Japanese in the sense that they are made from ingredients that are essential elements of the Japanese diet” (Keiko, 2001, p. 64) ,

containing grains, legumes, pure cane sugar, and agar-agar jelly. Even with foreign and Western influence, wagashi became a fixed part of Japanese culture during the Edo period, during which the country was closed to the majority of foreigners, thus allowing wagashi to “become established as a uniquely Japanese confection distinguished by its original designs and names” (Keiko, 2001, p. 73). Therefore, even with the growing popularity of Western-style sweets and confections, “traditional wagashi, for its heritage in Japan’s climate and culture, continues to appeal to the Japanese palate for its long-established flavor” (Keiko, 2001, p. 74).

Most forms of *wagashi* are modeled after and are meant to represent certain aspects of nature. Keiko reports that “that they are described as the food equivalent of *kigo* (words that symbolize the season in haiku)” (Keiko, 2001, p. 64). Many traditional types of *wagashi* are modeled and named after seasons, certain aspects of nature, and natural phenomena, and some will even be crafted with different colors depending on the season (Keiko, 2001). The aesthetics of *wagashi* are meant to capture and reflect themes on the fleeting beauty of nature and the seasons.

Mental Health & Japan

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, 2014). It is an important factor in the general definition of health, or “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946), as included in the WHO’s Constitution.

Japan’s state of mental health can be overviewed using data compiled by the WHO’s Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, which includes a Mental Health Evidence and Research team (MER) whose mission is “closing the gap between what is needed and what is currently available to reduce the burden of mental disorders worldwide and to promote mental health” (World Health Organization, 2018). The MER conducts the Mental Health Atlas Project to collect and report data regarding mental health and mental health resources. According to the 2014 Mental Atlas country profiles, with a total population of 126,999,807 (UN official estimate), Japan’s burden of mental disorders include 2,241 disability-adjusted life years (per

100,000 population) and 23.1 suicides (age-standardized rate per 100,000 population) (Mental Health: Evidence and Research Team, World Health Organization, 2014). The availability/status of mental health reporting consists of mental health data compiled only for general health statistics, and there are stand-alone policies/plans and laws for mental health available and fully implemented, as well as functioning programs for mental health promotion and prevention and a suicide prevention strategy (Mental Health: Evidence and Research Team, World Health Organization, 2014).

Nature, Mental Health, and *Wagashi*

Studies in environmental psychology have been conducted to review the effects of nature on cognitive function and mental health. Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily (2012) analyze the impact of nature on cognitive function and mental health using experiment results and studies in environmental psychology. Their research included many dimensions and ways of looking at the effects of nature on cognition in multiple studies, and while their findings included some negative aspects, there were many positive benefits of viewing natural landscapes and scenery and/or being present in nature (Bratman et al., 2012).

One theory of environmental psychology that focuses on the restorative power of nature is the stress reduction theory (SRT). According to the SRT, nature contains a healing power that “lies in an unconscious, automatic response to natural elements that can occur without recognition and most noticeably in individuals who have been stressed before the experience” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 122). Thus, “merely seeing or being present within nature can reduce stress through the automatic generation of physiological and psychological responses” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 122).

While these studies and theories focus on the effects of real, physical aspects of nature (e.g. landscapes), perhaps it may be possible that reproductions and symbols of nature can have the same effects by invoking the same sorts of cognitive activity and feelings. Because nature appears to have cognitive benefit whether present in it or simply viewing it, other visual representations ought to have similar benefits. Therefore, when eating or simply viewing *wagashi*, stress may reduce in the same way as when viewing natural landscapes or scenes.

Moreover, *wagashi* may have a connection to “landscape aesthetics” and “connectedness to nature.” Landscape aesthetics constitutes “efforts to analyze the ways in which people come to

explicitly judge the scenic beauty of an environment through stated preferences and willingness to pay, typically for levels and shapes of openness, obstruction, scale, and depth of views” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 127). The “connectedness to nature scale (CNS)” results from a survey conducted by Mayer and Frantz to “identify an individual’s conscious, stated level of emotional connection to nature” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 129). Because Mayer and Frantz claim that CNS scores are “correlated with life satisfaction, overall happiness, and perspective-taking ability” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 129), according to Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily (2012), CNS may also be linked to negative rumination, or the decrease in self-awareness in exchange for the feeling of group-belonging. Thus, in a connection to social psychology, the sense of belonging to nature as something greater than oneself can have similar benefits as “the feelings of belonging to a group can provide a sense of purpose and positive impact for individuals” (Bratman et al., 2012, p. 129).

Being an aspect of a larger culture as well as relating to nature aesthetics, *wagashi* may be able to provide such feelings of negative rumination in terms of both environmental and social psychological aspects. Firstly, *wagashi* in itself as an edible art form takes inspiration and shape from nature. Thus, while not necessarily the same as landscape aesthetics in the sense that *wagashi* does not depict a real scenic landscape, it still evokes similar judgements and preferences- after all, one typically chooses whether or not to purchase *wagashi* or participate in tea ceremonies. Therefore, the CNS can be applied in order to connect an individual’s emotional connection with nature in the form of *wagashi*. Furthermore, when engaging with *wagashi* (e.g. eating, tea ceremonies), individuals may feel a sense of connectedness to a greater culture. *Wagashi* is an established part of traditional Japanese culture with a long and elaborate history that makes it special to Japan. For example, “their names and designs reflect the sensitivity towards nature and beauty passed down from generation to generation for more than 1,000 years” (Keiko, 2001, p. 67), evoking a feeling of connectedness with the country’s and culture’s past. Thus, with *wagashi*, one may feel as a part of the larger Japanese culture, history, and society- Keiko (2001) writes that “to enjoy *wagashi* is to savor the history and culture of Japan” (p. 74). Because of this negative rumination due to landscape aesthetic-like connections to nature, *wagashi* is able to provide the benefits of sense of purpose and positive impact.

Conclusions and Future Directions

As a part of Japanese culture, *wagashi* may contain potential to provide mental health benefits. Its connections to nature, history, and the society as a whole may be able to influence the aforementioned statistics of Japan's state of mental health.

As my work consists of arbitrary and general speculations only, further studies on the relations between cultural heritage objects such as *wagashi* and mental health should be done to evaluate the possibilities of potential mental health strategies and treatments, as well as the potential to lower stigma surrounding mental health. Additionally, further concrete experiments and research are needed to test the true connections between *wagashi*, nature, and mental health/cognitive function to see if *wagashi* is truly able to impersonate the feelings and benefits that nature provokes. Additionally, if *wagashi* is found to have plausible benefits to mental health, then further work is needed to assess the potential of *wagashi*'s success in addressing mental health topics and issues in modern Japanese society.

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