



From Glass to Plastics

The Packaging Revolution of Postwar Japan

A virtual *u:japan* lecture by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka



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Thursday
2021-04-22
18:30~20:00
online

In May 2020 the Abe government launched an ambitious strategy of reducing Japan's disposable plastic waste by 25 percent within the next decade. Although it remains to be seen how far the government will succeed in this mission, a much more interesting question is why the country has turned into the world's second-highest user per capita of plastic packaging. Plastic has infiltrated the Japanese packaging market at a phenomenal speed. In terms of quantity (expressed in weight), its share more than doubled during the last three decades of the twentieth century, from around 9% in the

1970s to around 19% in the early 2000s. Since plastic is relatively light compared to other packaging materials, its success becomes even more apparent from the perspective of value. Comprising just 4.6% of the total value of Japanese packaging industry in 1958, by 2005 it skyrocketed to 30%. This paper will explore the forces behind the packaging revolution that took place in Japan during the 1950s and 1960, and the impact of these early decades on the rise of the culture of wrapping as we know it today.



Katarzyna J. Cwiertka is Chair of Modern Japan Studies at Leiden University. She is an expert on food history of modern Japan and Korea, both as a domain of culture and as a window into historical inquiry that extends beyond the realm of cuisine and nutrition. Cwiertka is the author of *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (Reaktion Books 2006), *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth Century Korea* (Reaktion Books 2012), *Himerareta washokushi* (Shinsensha 2016), and *Branding Japanese Food: From Meibutsu to Washoku* (University of Hawaii Press 2020). 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), *Critical Readings on Food in East Asia* (Brill 2012), *Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia* (Ashgate 2013), and *Consuming Life Post-Bubble Japan: A Trans-disciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam University Press 2018). Currently, Cwiertka is working on a book manuscript on the history of food packaging in Japan.

<https://japanologie.univie.ac.at/ujapanlectures>
ujapanlectures.ostasien@univie.ac.at